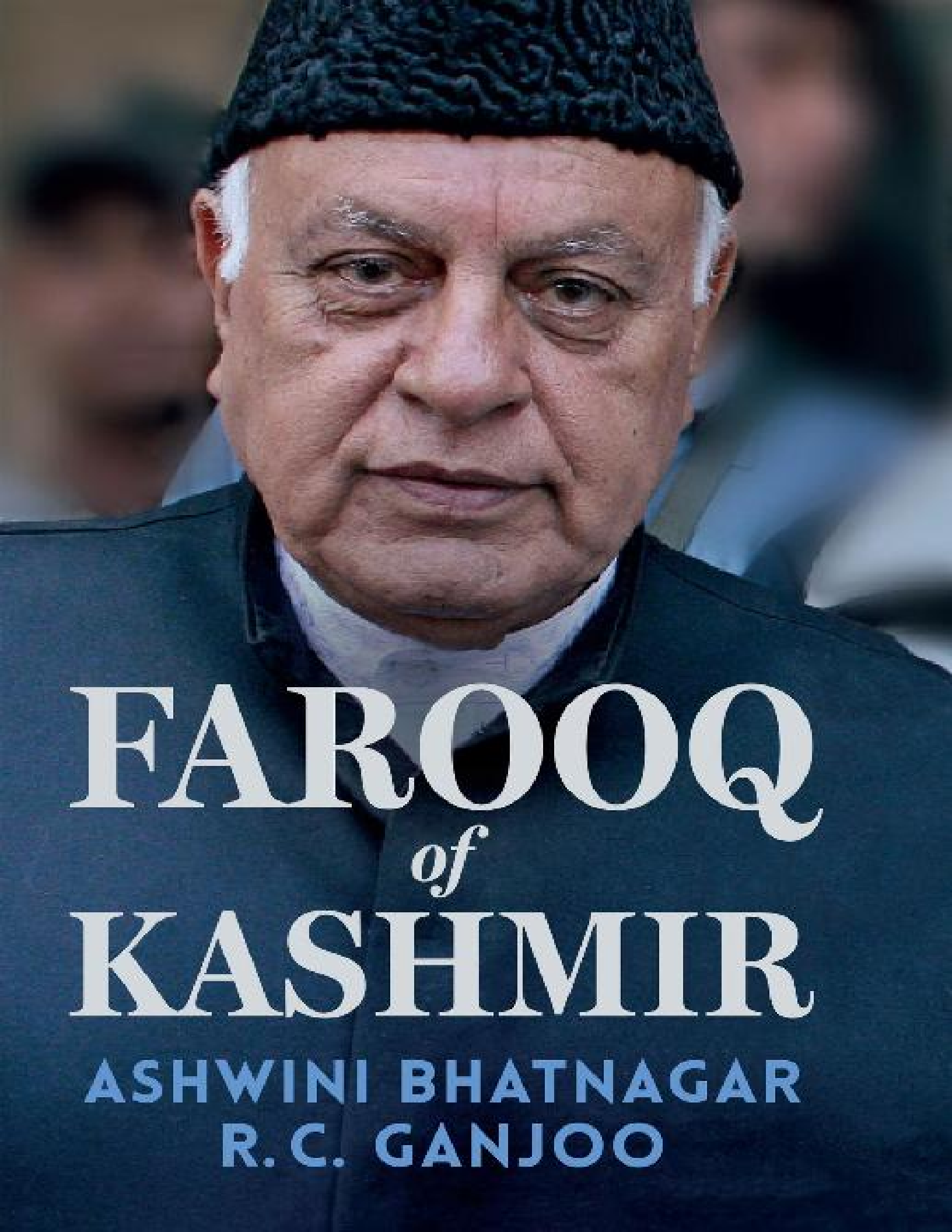
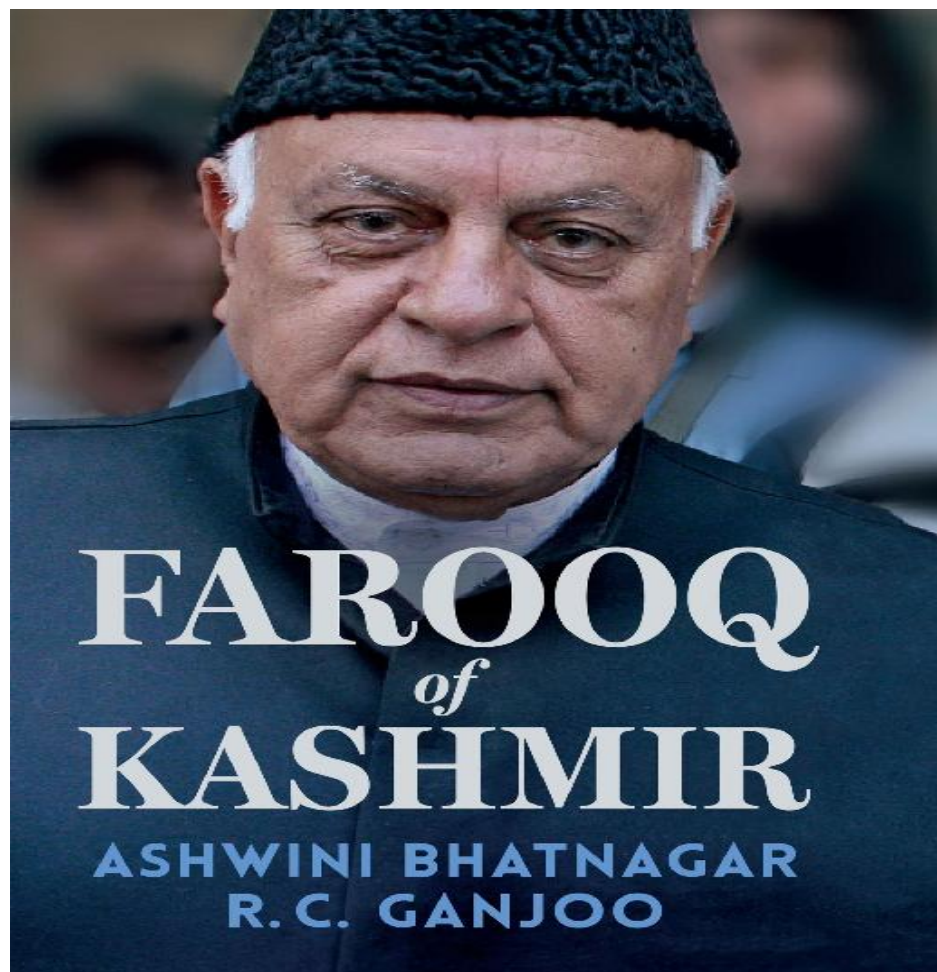
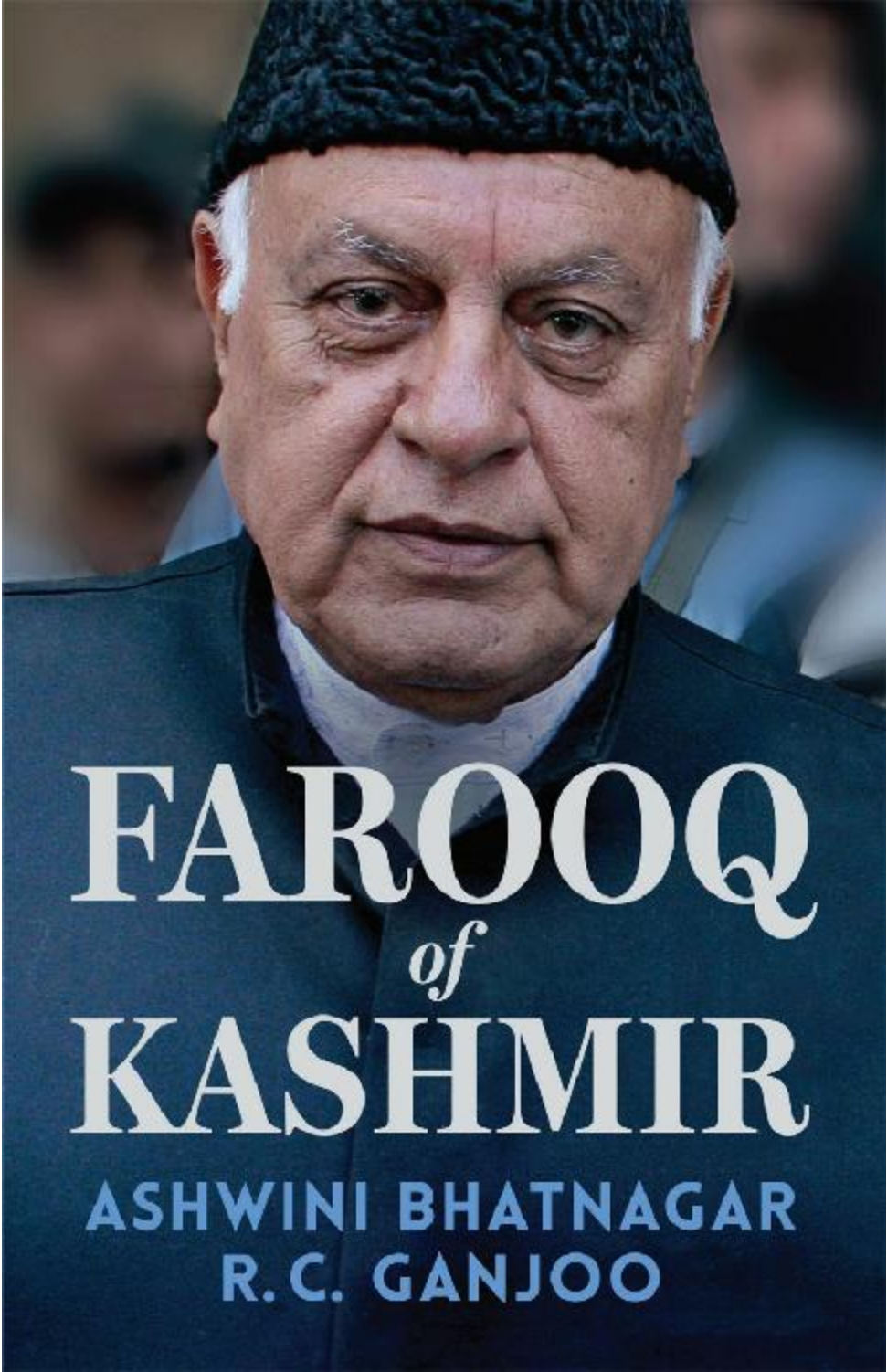


A close-up portrait of an elderly man with a serious expression, wearing a dark blue traditional Kashmiri cap (pheta) and a dark blue jacket over a white shirt. The background is blurred, showing other people in similar attire.

FAROOQ *of* KASHMIR

ASHWINI BHATNAGAR
R.C. GANJOO



A close-up portrait of an elderly man with white hair, wearing a dark blue traditional Kashmiri cap (pheta) and a dark blue jacket over a white shirt. He has a serious expression and is looking directly at the camera. The background is blurred, showing other people in similar attire.

FAROOQ *of* KASHMIR

ASHWINI BHATNAGAR
R. C. GANJOO

FAROOQ *of* **KASHMIR**

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Author's Note

J&K State Assembly elections in 2002 were conducted in four phases. The first phase was held on September 16, and the last on November 24.

We arrived in Srinagar on September 11 to the sensational news that the Minister of State for Law Mushtaq Ahmed Lone had been shot dead during an election rally in the terrorist-infested Lolab Valley along the Line of Control. The funeral was to be held the next day in Sogam, Kupwara district.

Defence Minister and in charge of Kashmir Affairs George Fernandes flew to Srinagar the same night and held a meeting with the top brass of the unified command at the IAF technical area.

The incident was important since it was for the first time that a sitting minister had been gunned down in Kashmir. The twist in the tale, however, was that the minister and his brother were also allegedly involved in the terrorist network, and the killing was a result of a dispute between them.

We drove down to Sogam. The miniscule rural town lies between a steep, thickly forested hill and gently rolling pasture land that crosses the border into Pakistan. The Army, BSF, and J&K Police had thrown a few 'tight' cordons around the town since Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah and Union Minister Fernandes were to attend the funeral ceremony in a school ground.

Farooq and his son Omar Abdullah arrived at the venue early that afternoon. They had barely paid homage to their slain colleague when terrorists opened fire from the hill side. Security men quickly escorted Farooq, Omar, and us to a safe nook behind a wall that separated the school from the pasture land. We were made to crouch as close to the wall as possible while a gun battle raged on the other side.

George Fernandes' helicopter soon appeared on the horizon. The terrorists stopped firing into the town and directed their AK-47s at the flying machine. IG Kashmir's wireless buzzed frantically as messages on the 'security situation' raced across the air waves. "No, the helicopter should return to base," the IG instructed, "it's too risky to land." The five-minute air show ended when the chopper tucked its tail between its legs and melted into the yellow of the sky.

The aerial face-off triggered a towering rage in Farooq. He gesticulated in an aggressive way and yelled curses at Pakistan. He then suddenly took off in the direction of the border with Pakistan like a Don Quixote tilting at the windmills. Security personnel scrambled after him and, after a tussle, brought him back to the shelter of the wall. He waited for a few minutes to regain his breath and dashed off again calling out the invisible enemy. Omar sat quietly away from the commotion and fiddled with his satellite phone. "What is he doing?" we asked him, concerned. "Nothing," he replied indifferently, "he will be fine soon."

After about 10 minutes of frenzy, Farooq seemed to have regained his poise. A moment later he spotted us and burst out once again. "This is what Pakistan does . . . don't you see what they do . . . They don't want Kashmir to live with India. But as long as Dr Farooq Abdullah is alive, he will not concede an inch to these bastards . . . I will bury them alive in their own home," he shouted, his eyes ablaze with anger. Omar moved farther away from the scene.

A number of questions troubled us as we drove back to Srinagar. How did the attack happen despite layers and layers of security? Why was Fernandes allowed to board the helicopter in Srinagar when the ground situation was still fluid in a terrorist-infested area? Was the Union Minister exposed to grave risk to show how fearful the situation was in Kashmir? Or was there no risk at all, and some fancy fireworks were put on display to make the day interesting?

After all, Farooq's emotional display from behind a brick wall to Pakistan's perfidy had got us involved for some time at least.

During the same elections, we were scheduled to travel from Srinagar to Kupwara, which was the hotbed of terrorist activity in Kashmir. But as we were leaving, our source gave us a tip-off, “Go to Handwara if you want to see some action tonight.” Intrigued by the friendly advice, we altered our plans and drove to Handwara. The constituency was to vote the next morning.

We contacted the sitting MLA (who was also a senior minister in National Conference government) on phone and he graciously offered to host us for the night. It was pitch dark when we arrived at his home.

“There is a small change in plans,” he told us after an early dinner, “I wanted you stay with me, but my home is rather overcrowded with workers preparing for the polling. You will be more comfortable, and safe, at my father-in-law’s house which is located half a kilometre away. We will meet at 8 tomorrow morning.”

We were driven to our new accommodation under heavy security cover. Tensions were palpable on the deserted streets. The father-in-law gave us tea and we discussed politics sitting cross-legged on rich Kashmiri carpets spread out on the floor. Peace was upon us.

Gunfire erupted around 9 p.m. Servants rushed to switch off the lights. A baby let out a series of shrill screams and bawled noisily somewhere in the house. We lay face down on the carpet amidst the din of shouting and yelling by security forces and terrorists, and the excited barking of street dogs. At times, the gunfire drew near us, and at other times, it retreated to a distance. It was scary.

The exchange of fire continued for about fifteen minutes before all-clear was sounded. Thirty second later, the phone rang. The minister inquired about our well-being from his father-in-law. “They are fine,” he answered with a smile though the short battle had unnerved us. We asked him if we could steady our nerves with something stronger than kehvah. “Of course!” he exclaimed with good cheer. We pulled out our bottle of rum.

The phone rang again. It was for us. “How was the action?” the caller asked with a laugh and hung up.

Polling was peaceful the next day.

The incident raised a few questions in our minds. How did our contact in Srinagar know about the intended strike hours before the votes were to be cast? He was not an Intelligence man, nor was he directly linked with terrorist outfits. He was a small-time public figure and he gave us the ‘tip’ to travel to Handwara during a casual conversation. Clearly, therefore, the strike was not staged for our benefit. It was planned for an overall impact on the constituency. Everybody, down to our contact in Srinagar, knew about it. The Minister too ‘secured’ us by moving the guests away from the target of the strike—his home.

The tamasha (spectacle) of democracy vs terrorism was in full play.

Nothing makes sense in Kashmir politics, and if it does, it makes several of them. There is no straight story, and therefore, two sides of a coin are not sufficient currency here. In fact, (socio-political) currency changes colour from hand to hand until it dissolves into thin air.

Farooq is thin air. And like the air of the mountains, he’s there, but not sufficiently. He’s the essential oxygen that keeps the Kashmir card alive though gasping for breath in a dramatic way. A unique ecosystem has also grown around this struggle of the people to breathe fully. There is, of course, promise of enough (outright azadi, full autonomy, etc.), but never is it even close to enough. The noose always tightens at the right moment (Pakistan-sponsored terrorism or communal riots) and the people have to rush back to Farooq for fresh breath when the thinness of the air suffocates them. Clever moves have kept them on the edge of hope and near the abyss of despair through the last 45 years of Farooq’s politics.

This book is essentially a political biography of Farooq Abdullah, but since he spans the distance between his father Sheikh Abdullah and his son Omar, it is, in a way, a biography of the Abdullah family, too.

We do not wish to name people who helped us during our reporting years between 1980 and 2020. They are far too many of them, and they already know how deeply indebted we are to them.

We are very appreciative of the support that the Fingerprint Executive Publisher Shantanu Duttagupta and his team provided us during the process of making this book. We are especially grateful to our editor, Kashish Sood, for her diligent editing effort. It was a privilege working with her.

We hope our book Farooq of Kashmir engages you.

Ashwini Bhatnagar & R.C. Ganjoo

Prologue

Silence of suspicion descended on the Kashmir Valley as autumn ripened the Chinar leaves and dropped them dead around the roots. The sky was still clear of the pre-winter mist, but smoke signals swishing from the closely sequestered homes in downtown Srinagar in 2019 were thick with hushed talk that was full of dread. Kashmir is on the verge of another upheaval, they said. A storm is coming.

There was restlessness at Gupkar Road, too. The broad snaky ribbon of tar on the hill above the lake connected the political elite of Kashmir with the masses below. The Abdullah clan lives there, so do the Muftis. The two families have dominated Kashmir politics for several decades. But they now feared that the Government of India was set to isolate them on the hilltop; smash the very plank—Article 370 of the Constitution—on which they had built their politics since 1948.

Civil life, like the weather in the Vale of Kashmir, was always uncertain and oppressive for as long as one cared to remember. Though the Valley grew lush and prosperous during the ‘season’, the coldness of the perennial snow on the tall Pir Panjal peaks constantly reminded the people that the thaw would freeze soon. The foreboding lay in plain sight in 2019, too.

Kashmir is a desiccated land in more ways than one. Its name Kashmir is of Sanskrit origin. It means desiccated from water. According to mythological accounts, the narrow valley, barely 32 kilometres wide and 135 kilometres long, was once a great lake called Satisar. It was the abode of Goddess Sati, Lord Shiva’s consort.

A fierce demon called Jalodbhava, blessed with immortality by Lord Brahma, however, occupied the lake, and tormented humans and nagas living there. Sage Kashyap pleaded with Lord Vishnu to liberate it from the demon.

Lord Vishnu killed Jalodbhava with his chakra (divine discus), then took the form of boar and head-butted a mountain near present-day Baramulla (Varahamula) to create an opening for the lake to drain out. The dry bed of Satisar lake came to be called Kashmir—the land retrieved from water by Sage Kashyap. He later invited Brahmins to settle down in the valley; Lord Shiva became the presiding God.

Kashmir, its people, and culture are conjoined intimately with lakes. Sat-Sar in Ganderbal has seven interconnected alpine lakes. The city of Srinagar is built on the shores of the Dal Lake. Adjoining the Dal is Nagin and nearby lies the Hokersar lake. Two hours away is one of Asia's largest water bodies—the Wular Lake in Bandipora district. Mansabal and Gangabal in Ganderbal are the other important fresh water lakes in the region. And, of course, the Jhelum River drains the entire valley.

The earliest written history in India, Rajatarangini, was penned by a Kashmiri poet, Kalhan, in 12th century CE. The voluminous work traces the rule of different Kashmir dynasties and kings from as far back as 2448 BCE, starting with Gonanda I. The ruler was a contemporary of the Pandava Yudhishtira. He fought for the Kaurvas in the great battle of Mahabharata and was killed by Yudhishtira's brother, Bheema. Nevertheless, the Gonanda dynasty continued in Kashmir; it ruled for 1266 years.

Kashmir became a part of the Mauryan empire during the reign of Ashoka (304–232 BCE) and fell under Buddhist influence. Many stupas were built, along with shrines dedicated to Lord Shiva, during that time. The period also saw the establishment of Srinagari (now Srinagar).

King Kanishka of Kushan dynasty (127–151 CE) thereafter conquered Kashmir and established the new city of Kanishkapura. He organized the Fourth Buddhist Council there. It was attended by eminent scholars like Ashvaghosha, Nagarjuna, and Vasumitra. By the fourth century, Kashmir became a seat of learning for Buddhism as well as Hinduism. Kashmiri Buddhist missionaries travelled to Tibet and China, and propagated Buddhism in the entire northern region.

A succession of Hindu dynasties took over Kashmir between the 7th and 14th centuries. They produced great warrior kings of Karkota dynasty like Chandrapida and Lalitaditya Muktapida (8th century CE). Chandrapida's sovereignty over Kashmir was recognized by the Chinese Emperor via an imperial order. His son, Lalitaditya, led a successful military campaign against the Tibetans. He then defeated Yashovarman of Kanyakubja, and conquered eastern India kingdoms of Magadha, Kamarupa, Gauda, and Kalinga. His influence also extended to Malwa in central India and Gujarat in the west. He routed the Arabs in Sindh.

The long, vigorous rule of Hindu kings produced many poets, philosophers, and artists who made significant contributions to Sanskrit literature and Hindu religion. Vasugupta (c. 875–925 CE) wrote the Shiva Sutra and founded a monistic Shaiva system called Kashmir Shaivism. Later, Abhinavagupta (c. 975–1025 CE) wrote many philosophical works on Kashmir Shaivism and roundly defeated the dualistic interpretation of Shaiva scriptures. His philosophy became the practised faith of common Kashmiri folk.

Oppressive taxation, corruption, internecine fights, and rise of feudal lords during the unpopular rule of the Lohara dynasty (1003–1320 CE) paved the way for foreign invasions of Kashmir. A Turko-Mongol warlord Du'l Qadr, also known as Zulchu, raided Kashmir in 1320. The last Lohara dynast fled after a brief resistance and chaos erupted in the region. Rinchan, an ambitious Tibetan Buddhist refugee, seized power, and under the influence of his Prime Minister Shah Mir, converted to Islam. The Tibetan Buddhist became the first Muslim king of Kashmir. On Rinchan's death, Shah Mir grabbed power and founded the Mir dynasty.

Islam subsequently became the dominant religion in Kashmir. Persian replaced Sanskrit and its literature disappeared. Sultan Sikandar (1389–1413 CE), also known as But-Shikan or destroyer of idols, completed the process of Islamization through the liberal use of his sword.

Kashmir came under the sway of the Mughals in 1586 when Akbar added it to his Kabul province. It prospered during their reign. However, as the Mughals weakened in Delhi, they lost control over the Valley. Afghan king Ahmed Shah Durrani annexed Kashmir in 1752, but the rule lasted only till

1819 when the Sikhs under Maharaja Ranjit Singh entered the Valley. They enacted a number of anti-Muslim laws, including death sentences for cow slaughter, closing down the Jama Masjid in Srinagar, and banning the azaan.

Earlier, in 1780, after the death of Ranjit Deo, the kingdom of Jammu was taken over by the Sikhs. Ranjit Deo's grandnephew, Gulab Singh, sought service at the court of Ranjit Singh and distinguished himself in military campaigns. He was appointed as the Raja of Jammu in 1820. Sikh commander Zorawar Singh and Gulab Singh then went on to conquer high altitude Ladakh and Baltistan areas adjoining Kashmir. It was a rare military feat.

The First Anglo-Sikh War broke out in 1845. Gulab Singh tacitly supported the British by adopting the role of a useful mediator and advisor to Sir Henry Lawrence. The Sikhs lost the war and the East India Company imposed an exorbitant penalty on them. They were unable to raise the money. Gulab Singh paid 7.50 million nanakshahi rupees to the Company to acquire Kashmir. The Treaty of Amritsar made him the first Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir.

The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was constituted between 1820 and 1858. It combined disparate regions, religions, and ethnicities—to the east, Ladakh was ethnically and culturally Tibetan and its inhabitants practised Buddhism; to the south, Jammu had a mixed population of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs; in the heavily populated central Kashmir Valley, the population was overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, with a small but influential Hindu minority, the Kashmiri Pandits; to the northeast, sparsely populated Baltistan had a population ethnically related to Ladakh, which practised Shia Islam; to the north, the thinly populated Gilgit Agency was an area of diverse, mostly Shia groups; and to the west, Poonch was Muslim, but of different ethnicity than the Kashmir Valley. Dissonance was, therefore, inbuilt into the basic structure of the princely state; more so because of the harsh taxation policies imposed on the Kashmiris by the Durranis, the Sikhs and, subsequently, the Dogras.

Hari Singh was crowned the Maharaja of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1926. He succeeded his uncle, Maharaja Pratap Singh. Muslims

formed 77% of the population of his State, Hindus comprised 20%, while the Sikhs and Buddhist were 1.5% and 1%, respectively.* Despite being in a majority, the Muslims suffered severe oppression in the form of high taxes, unpaid forced labour and discriminatory laws. They were chronically in debt to landlords and moneylenders. Many Kashmiri Muslims migrated from the Valley to Punjab due to famine that had aggravated their extreme poverty. Muslim peasants lacked education, awareness of rights and were not politically organized. Political parties were banned in the princely state at that time; civil society discourse was, therefore, shuttered inside 'reading rooms'. It was prohibited from spilling into the streets outside. However, public anger against the Maharaja was building up steadily.

Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah was born on December 5, 1905 in Soura, a village on the outskirts of Srinagar, two weeks after the death of his father Sheikh Mohammed Ibrahim, a middle-class shawl trader. He was the youngest of the six siblings. His great-grandfather was a Kashmiri Pandit of the Kaul clan, who converted to Islam under the influence of a Sufi preacher.*

The Sheikh started his schooling in a traditional maktab at the age of four where he learnt the recitation of the Quran and some basic Persian texts like Gulistan of Sa'di, Bostan, and Padshahnama. After matriculation, he joined Shri Pratap College in Kashmir and wanted to pursue medicine after graduation. Circumstances, however, forced him to take up general science at Islamia College in Lahore. He moved from Lahore to Aligarh Muslim University and obtained a M.Sc. degree in Chemistry in 1930. While at Aligarh, he came under the influence of progressive ideas and turned a leftist, though he was equally adept at quoting long verses from the Quran in his speeches.

The Sheikh was affected by the deprivation and oppression that he saw around him in Kashmir. He was still a student, but restive over the plight of peasants under Maharaja Hari Singh's rule. He joined a 'reading room' in 1922 to air his distress and explore options for political action on it.

Official permission was granted in 1930 to start the Fateh Kadal Reading Room Party and Sheikh Abdullah became its secretary. It later converted itself into the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference, and finally,

egged on by Congress leader Jawaharlal Nehru, emerged as a secular and inclusive Jammu & Kashmir National Conference in 1939.

The Sheikh fought several epic battles on the streets against the Maharaja in favour of the deprived and discriminated peasants of the princely state. He was the people's hero—Sher-e-Kashmir (the Lion of Kashmir)—in the fight against the monarchical system.

British paramountcy ended in 1947 with the partition of the Indian sub-continent into two sovereign states of India and Pakistan. The Maharaja of Kashmir had the choice to opt for India or Pakistan. He vacillated between the two options, and even paused to consider the third—to remain independent of both the newly formed nations. A rush of events in the weeks after the formation of the Dominions of India and Pakistan, including the 'tribal raid' sponsored by Pakistan that threatened to overrun Kashmir and the Poonch rebellion, forced the Maharaja to sign the Instrument of Accession on October 26, 1947 with India.

The Pakistan government immediately protested the accession. It said that the Maharaja acted under duress; he had no right to sign an agreement with India when the Standstill Agreement with Pakistan was still in force.

Historically speaking, it was because of Kashmir's pivotal geo-strategic location that the British wanted the State to be part of the new nation of Pakistan. It was to be a bulwark against socialist expansionism of the USSR. At the same time, India, as the heir apparent, had her own strategic interests. Nehru was clear about the strategic importance of Kashmir. "India without Kashmir would cease to occupy a pivotal position on the political map of Central Asia . . . strategically, Kashmir is vital for security of India . . . it has been so since the dawn of history," he said.*

The Sheikh was in Maharaja's jail in the early part of 1947. He had launched Quit Kashmir Movement against the ruler in May 1946 and was serving a three-year sentence. Nehru, while negotiating the terms of accession, made the release of the Sheikh and his appointment as Head of Emergency Administration, a pre-condition to the State's merger into India. Nehru believed that Sheikh would steer the sensitive northern-most border state to a full and final integration with the Union of India.

The Maharaja acquiesced to the demand. Sheikh Abdullah was released on September 29, 1947, and appointed to the post three days after the Instrument of Accession was ratified by the outgoing Viceroy and India's new Governor General, Lord Mountbatten, on October 27.

Soon after taking over the State's administration, Sheikh Abdullah raised a force of local Kashmiri volunteers to patrol Srinagar against the Pakistan-sponsored 'tribal' marauders who had reached as close as Baramulla. The Sheikh's militia held Srinagar till Indian troops landed.

In early 1948, India approached the United Nations to seek a resolution to the conflict over Kashmir. It led to the formation of United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan (UNCIP) and the passage of the UN Security Council Resolution 47 on April 21, 1948. The UN mission wanted that the opinion of people of J&K should be sought on the issue of joining either India or Pakistan. Prime Minister Nehru too favoured such an exercise, but insisted that a referendum should not be held until the entire State had been cleared of Pakistani irregulars.

Nehru invited the Sheikh to lay the facts of Pakistan aggression in Kashmir at a UN session. The Sheikh described the horrors of Pakistan's invasion before the assembly in a vivid manner on February 5, 1948. "The (tribal) raiders came to our land, massacred thousands of people—mostly Hindus and Sikhs, but Muslims, too—abducted thousands of girls, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims alike, looted our property and almost reached the gates of our summer capital, Srinagar." The Sheikh went on to compare the Pakistan government with Hitler's government—"I had thought all along that the world had got rid of Hitlers and Goebbels, but . . . I am convinced they have only transmigrated their souls into Pakistan"—and declared Kashmir could not be anything else than a part of Indian Union.§

On January 5, 1949, UNCIP resolved that the question of the accession of the state of Jammu and Kashmir to India or Pakistan would be decided through a free and impartial plebiscite. The plebiscite would be held after Pakistan ensured the withdrawal the 'irregular' forces from the entire State. The Indian and Pakistan army would then withdraw from the area under a Truce Agreement to ensure a fair referendum.

Both the countries, however, failed to arrive at a truce agreement due to differences in interpretation of the procedure for and extent of demilitarization. The biggest stumbling block was the question whether the Azad Kashmir army of Pakistan was to be disbanded during the truce stage or at the plebiscite stage.

The war between the two countries that broke out in August 1947, ended in the last days of 1948 when the UN brokered a ceasefire between India and Pakistan. The latter, however, held on to the territories, which legitimately belonged to the erstwhile princely state, including a part of Kashmir (now called Pakistan Occupied Kashmir), and Gilgit-Baltistan. Currently, India controls half of the princely state; Pakistan has one third. It ceded about 5,000 square kilometres area on the north-eastern edge of POK to China through a treaty in 1963.

The Sino-Pak treaty, in fact, placed China formally and firmly on record recognizing Pakistan's control of the disputed territory. More importantly, it brought China into the play in an essentially bilateral dispute over Kashmir. Time magazine opined in 1963 that by signing the agreement, Pakistan had further 'dimmed hopes of settlement' of the Kashmir conflict.

China had also occupied Aksai Chin, the north eastern part of the erstwhile princely state in the early 1950s, despite Nehru's insistence that Aksai Chin was 'a part of the Ladakh region of India for centuries' and the border was a 'firm and definite one which was not open to discussion with anybody'. The face-off over the territory was one of the major reasons for the war with China in 1962.

The plebiscite could never be conducted and the Kashmir issue became a bitter bone of contention between the two countries. It led to three more wars—in 1965, 1971 and 1999—and three decades of Pak-sponsored insurgency and Islamic terrorism in J&K.

The Sheikh was the 'Prime Minister' of J&K from March 5, 1948 to August 8, 1953. He wielded enough influence over New Delhi for Nehru to concede a 'special status to J&K' via Article 370 of the Constitution of India. It guaranteed a separate flag, constitution, and autonomy to the border State. Except for defence, communication and external affairs, J&K

was autonomous in all other respects. The Sheikh was in total control through these provisions, but still pressed on for more and more autonomy to implement his vision of Naya Kashmir (New Kashmir) and its relationship with the Union of India and Government of Pakistan.

He often toyed with the idea of an 'independent' status for Kashmir through an alliance with Pakistan, and drummed up allegations of 'betrayal' by New Delhi on promises of full autonomy. He also played up the issue of holding plebiscite in the Kashmir Valley. Intelligence inputs on his hobnobbing with foreign powers led to his arrest in the Kashmir Conspiracy case in 1953. Nehru personally cleared the arrest of his 'friend' after listening to surveillance tapes and reading the letters written by him to his contacts on the other side of the border. The Union Government charged him with conspiring with Pakistan agents to overthrow the duly elected Government of the State.

Though the Sheikh was unconditionally released in 1964 by Nehru and was asked to broker peace between India and Pakistan, his entry into Kashmir was banned again in 1965 by his successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri. The Sheikh had hobnobbed with the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in Algiers during this time. He could finally return to the Valley in 1975 after signing an accord with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in which he gave up his demand for plebiscite in Kashmir.

Intriguingly, the Sheikh asked his London-based son, Farooq Abdullah, to fly to Pakistan and brief Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto on the pact after it was finalized in 1974. He signed it after Bhutto gave it a go ahead. "We are no longer in a position to help Kashmir (after the 1971 war), so take what you can get. If you are offered peace and power in Kashmir, take it" he advised Farooq.*

Sheikh Abdullah was Chief Minister from 1975 till he died in 1983. He was succeeded by his son Farooq Abdullah, who, despite his roller-coaster political innings, truly made himself indispensable to Kashmir's volatile polity. Though he continued to be a solo political player in the scene, he passed on the baton of the party's leadership to his son, Omar Abdullah, in 2002, and, subsequently, the mantle of chief ministership in 2009.

Three generations of the Abdullah family have, therefore, been chief ministers during the 100 years of their political influence. In fact, during the century of being in power—and out of it at times—the Abdullahs have been central to the Valley politics. They are the longest-running political dynasty in Kashmir, and in India, save the Nehru-Gandhi family.

By the beginning of 2014, the Abdullahs came under strain. Chief Minister Omar Abdullah not only lost power in the Assembly elections, but his party, the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, was pushed to the third post by a resurgent and aggressive nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP entered into an alliance with the largest party—Mufti Mohammad Sayeed's Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)—and formed a coalition government with Mufti Sayeed as the Chief Minister. Mufti died on January 7, 2016. His daughter, Mehbooba, took over as Chief Minister.

The partnership collapsed in June 2018 and Governor's rule was enforced in the State. Former bureaucrat N.N. Vohra was replaced by Satyapal Malik as Governor. Malik became the first politician to be the constitutional head of the J&K State. So far, the appointees were always drawn from the civil or the defence services.

Kashmir was a major issue for the Narendra Modi government when it took over the reins of power at the Centre. The Prime Minister started his tenure in 2014 by reaching out to Pakistan in order to start a substantive dialogue on bilateral matters, including the vexed Kashmir issue. In an unprecedented move, he invited Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, along with other SAARC leaders, to his swearing in. He followed it up by making an unscheduled stop over in Lahore on Christmas Day, 2015 to greet his counterpart on his birthday—a move that defied diplomatic convention and stunned foreign policy experts.

The excitement over a possible turnaround in India-Pakistan relations was soon punctured. On January 2, 2016, five Jaish-e-Mohammed terrorists attacked the Pathankot Air Force Station. The terrorists were killed, but India too lost 7 soldiers. The attack shocked the nation and enthused home-grown terrorists in the Valley.

Burhan Wani was one such 'local terrorist'. The 21-year-old Hizb-ul-Mujahideen 'commander' used the social media to emerge as a cult figure and singlehandedly turned the Pakistan-fuelled insurgency into a youth-oriented movement. Hundreds of young men either joined him in his jihadi war, or became deeply sympathetic towards him. Burhan's free run did not last long. He was killed in an anti-terrorist operation on July 8, 2016.

Burhan's death caused an upheaval. Protests and violent stone-pelting incidents broke out across Kashmir. The Mehbooba Mufti government clamped curfew in the Valley for 53 consecutive days to contain the violence, in which more than 96 people were killed.

Burhan's killing, in fact, was a watershed moment, the second after the kidnapping of Rubaiya Sayeed in 1989, in the history of militancy in J&K. It reignited the calls for azadi and jihad. Pakistan was quick to exploit the situation. It stepped up the infiltration of trained terrorists to carry out attacks on Indian military installations.

The target of the first terror strike was the 12th Brigade of the Indian Army in Uri sector on September 18, 2016. As many as 19 army men were killed. Another ghastly attack was carried out by a Jaish-e-Mohammed suicide bomber near Pulwama on February 14, 2019. 40 CRPF men were killed.

The developments were a new aggressive phase in Kashmir unrest. It was no longer a call for independence, or even merger with Pakistan; it was a call for a caliphate. Though Islamic State (IS) was not yet physically present, internet-based jihadi indoctrination had overwhelmed the sentiment of azadi. Between 2011 and 2016, internet penetration jumped from 3 % to 28%. It was clear that the young had tuned into jihadi broadcasts in a big way.

Radicalism also meant the traditional politicians in the Valley were no more relevant. Not only the Abdullahs and Sayeeds, but also the Hurriyat, were driven to the margins. They were now in no position to influence a large swathe of Kashmir's young population. Stone-pelting by 'angry boys' became endemic.

The events of 2016 had another impact. With television news media in active play, counter opinion built up steadily against the ‘appeasement of Kashmiris by previous governments’ in the rest of India. Public impatience with Kashmiri politicians, Kashmiri victimhood, Kashmiri secessionist tendencies, and Pakistan-sponsored terrorism hit a new high. Kashmir became a national bear bug as TV and social media continuously flashed images of Kashmir terrorism and its ‘Hate India Campaign’ into the lives of Indians. They reacted with revulsion.

82-year-old Dr Farooq Abdullah was distinctly uneasy with how the political situation was panning out. He was still sensitive to political signals, and his reactions were yet sharp. The disquiet increased when in mid-2019 the talk about altering or deleting Article 35A of the Constitution of India, which disallowed buying of land by people other than the J&K State subjects, became shrill. There were public discussions also on the utility of retaining Article 370 in the Indian Constitution.

The BJP top leadership, it was rumoured, had made up its mind to scrap the Article 370 to honour its electoral promise made in 2014, and reiterated in 2019. It had the intent, and also the means, with its huge 303-member majority in Lok Sabha, to carry out the demolition of Article 370.

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Chapter

1

The Lion of Kashmir—Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah—commanded immediate attention with his big six-foot-four frame, buck-teeth that shone kindly upon friends, tooth brush moustache, and a hairline that had receded to the middle of his scalp invariably covered with a fur cap in Aligarhi style. The Sheikh always also draped his large frame with slightly loose shervanis and wore wide-flared Aligarhi pyajamas. The short ends of the long coat flapped noisily when he took long purposeful strides to cover the distance between adversity and opportunity.

The king of Kashmir's political jungle had come a long way since he started his politics in the early 1920s. He now roared amongst his fellow dwellers, but kept a friendly distance with the other big players in the hunt. He was shrewd as well as sagacious; a street fighter who was a diplomat, too.

He could, it was said, flip a coin and always make the right call. The myth persisted in the Valley irrespective of the fact that he made several wrong calls in his political career. The huge appeal he enjoyed among his people was, therefore, never gainfully utilized because the Sheikh could not make up his mind. He was here, but there, too—never sure of the larger boundaries, yet fiercely keen to fence his own turf. He paid a heavy price for it—twenty-one years of his political life were spent in exile and detention.

Despite the adversity, Sheikh Abdullah did not lose ground in Kashmir. His absence turned him into a legendary figure. The Sheikh, it was popularly believed in political circles, ran rings from Srinagar to New Delhi, and

called all the shots in the State of Jammu and Kashmir. He was ‘the voice of the people’; the ‘most revered and loved leader’ of Kashmir.

Jammu and Ladakh regions of the State were not as enthusiastic as Srinagar was about him. But they did not matter. Power, in J&K, flowed from the gently lapping shores of the Dal Lake because the Kashmir Valley’s representation in the State Assembly far outweighed that of Jammu and Ladakh. Anyone who roused up the Valley could flatten the two adjoining hinterlands. Kashmir was a sensitive international issue, too, and the Sheikh used the sensitivity to full advantage.

It was 1981 now. Sheikh Abdullah had ended his exile six years ago when he signed the Delhi Agreement with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and returned to J&K as Chief Minister. He was 75, and ailing. Kashmir was firmly in his grip. It was time to bequeath his political legacy to the family—like his ‘friend’ and India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had done. Nehru’s daughter, Indira Gandhi, had succeeded him admirably. Sheikh Abdullah wished his son did likewise.

The Lion fretted about succession a lot. He was in the winter of his life, but the cub was out at play. It was still glorious springtime for him. He, perhaps, did not realize that his father had borne ‘immense hardships’ to arrive at the hard place which others could never hope to reach. The gorgeous Kashmir Valley, cradled between the Pir Panjal range in the south and the Greater Himalayas in the north, resounded with his roar. He was the master of all he surveyed. He had secured the prize for his son and wanted him to hold it responsibly and carry it forward.

“My time in politics is over,” he mused while speaking to journalists and key loyalists. “Someone else, someone younger, should take over. But we have to lay down guidelines.”

Farooq Abdullah, the eldest son, was the natural choice from among his brood consisting of two other sons—Sheikh Mustafa Kamal and Tariq Abdullah, and daughters, Khalida and Suraiya. Khalida, the eldest child, was married to a close confidant of the Sheikh, G.M. Shah. She was also active in managing political matters in her father and husband’s households.

“Oh yes, I did (advise Farooq to join politics),” Sheikh Abdullah admitted with a twinkle in his eyes and a sly smile, “I told him that this is a constructive phase and he can help the country by running a hospital! But politics is more glamorous than anything else. The question is, we want to hand over to young people. They must take responsibility. Now, there should be a young man who has a popular base, whom the young support. And there was a demand for Dr Farooq from all over the party.”**

A year earlier, in 1980, Sheikh Abdullah had bowed before another ‘demand’ and gifted his son the party’s nomination from the Srinagar Lok Sabha seat. The Sheikh’s influence in the Valley, more so in Srinagar, ensured Farooq was elected unopposed.

Farooq had shifted to London in 1965 to practise medicine. He married a UK national there and acquired British citizenship. The turn in family fortunes in 1975, however, brought him back to Kashmir.

The question that in a democracy there were other people who ought to be encouraged to takeover political responsibilities did cross Sheikh Abdullah’s mind, but it didn’t really rankle. He had built the political fortune by the dint of his labour, and it was customary to pass it on to his eldest son. There were people, he said, who fitted the bill equally, if not more. “But,” he smiled mischievously, “they haven’t gained the prominence, or the notoriety that I have. You see, I’ve been in close contact with the people for 50 years. I’m so close to the people, even my bitterest opponent, who does not like me, cannot push me out.”*

The decision on a parliamentary seat nomination was easy. None of his colleagues gave second thought to it. The choice of a successor to lead National Conference, and subsequently become the Chief Minister, was tough for the Sheikh. He was buffeted by strong headwinds. He wished his successor had the political acumen and honesty of his son-in-law, Ghulam Mohammed (G.M.) Shah, along with the ability to build and sustain an organization. He also wished the successor was somewhat flamboyant like him in his connect with the masses. Farooq Abdullah was, of course, smart, but he was ‘attracted to the glamour of politics’. Shah’s acumen and reliability were missing in him.

The Sheikh agonized between the two choices—Farooq or Shah—till a decision became inevitable. He chose Farooq over Shah to head the party. The son grasped his father's helping hand eagerly.

On an autumn day of August 21, 1981, Srinagar reverberated with challenging cries of 'National, National. All are National'. The reference was to Sheikh Abdullah's political party, the National Conference, and the slogan challenged others to find those who were not with the National Conference, and its leader. The slogan was also a celebratory chant for the incoming party chief, Dr Farooq Abdullah.

Farooq planned his succession meticulously. Days before the ceremony, he personally mobilized the cadre to make it a memorable event. Volunteers were sent to the lanes and by-lanes of Srinagar with posters and banners to decorate every inch of available space. They were told to rally people from every house and make them flood the streets. It helped as Sheikh Abdullah was much loved and Farooq was a charmer. People needed little prodding to explode into a celebratory mayhem. Srinagar's streets were jammed the night preceding the event.

The formal take-over of the party by the 44-year-old son of a 75-year-old father was a grand event, and governmental machinery was pressed into service to ensure the 'crowning moment' went off without a hitch. An undeclared holiday was observed in all offices and educational institutions to mark the 'national festival'.

Farooq started the 'historic' day by leading a noisy and unruly procession through the main streets of the city. A vast crowd, by one's estimate of about half a million, followed him, cheering the new leader. Groups of men danced to the beat 'National, National. All are National'. A visibly pleased Farooq egged them on, waving his arms in rhythm with the beat of the chants.

Sheikh Abdullah and his family watched the triumphal march from the balcony of Lal Rukh Hotel. The ageing Lion of Kashmir gathered flowers in his hands again and again, and showered them upon his son. Two other national political stalwarts, H.N. Bahuguna and Chandrajeet Yadav, joined Sheikh Abdullah in pouring their blessings on the son-rise.

Hours later, the procession arrived at Iqbal Park, the venue of the National Conference meeting to appoint Sheikh Abdullah's successor. The Park was crowded with 4,000 delegates of the party. The long-time party president rose and affixed the National Conference badge on Dr Farooq Abdullah's chest. He then guided him to the presidential chair. A thunderous roar of approval went up as the new president took his seat.

Sheikh Abdullah began his last presidential speech. "After 50 years," he said with his typical flourish, "I get a chance on this historic moment to transfer to the younger generation the trust handed over to me by martyrs—I lighted this torch, and many a storm could not extinguish it until today when (I) transfer (it). Fervently, I hope that Dr Farooq shall prove worthy of the trust. I transfer my presidency to him."✠✠

He then, ironically, harked back to the history of the Congress Party to justify the 'crowning' of his son. He recalled the moment when, at the 1929 session of the Indian National Congress, Pandit Motilal Nehru passed the reigns of leadership to his son Jawaharlal.

Moti Lal Nehru, also a Kashmiri, had quoted from 13th century Persian poet Sheikh Saadi, "If the father doesn't accomplish the task, the son can," as a reason for the political succession. The Sheikh did likewise.

Jawaharlal's succession was through a common consensus among Congress leaders. But public enthusiasm notwithstanding, the moment of transition for Farooq was a fractured one. Sheikh Abdullah had bequeathed leadership to the young dynast without getting his seasoned colleagues fully on board. The discussions—polite and discreet—led to a delay of about five months in the Sheikh casting the dice in favour of Farooq.

The primary dissent to the son's supremacy was from within the family itself. G.M. Shah, the party's strongman and the Sheikh's son-in-law, who was also the Works Minister in the State Cabinet, was unhappy at being overlooked for the job. Shah's nephew, Mohiuddin Shah, general secretary of the NC, was miffed too. He was in direct competition for political largesse with Sheikh Nazir, the Sheikh's adopted son and the provisional president of the party. Nazir was making noises, too. "State politics has entered a new phase and the generation gap is to be narrowed down in the

interest of the party. Unfortunately, our leaders have left the youth uneducated and untrained in all respects,” he said days before Farooq’s elevation. He did not think the Sheikh had made the right choice. Farooq was still ‘untrained’.

Farooq threw in his lot with young leaders as soon as he took over. He made it clear that he needed to replace the old with the young. “I will induce a larger number of youth to join me in the organizational set-up,” he said.

The party’s old guard did not take the statement kindly. Farooq retreated and tried to play both the sides. “I shall be combining old and new together. Respect for the elders can never die, and the youth can’t be ignored,” he said in a conciliatory tone even as he was raring to break loose from a party hierarchy largely composed of old loyalists who owed allegiance to his brother-in-law G.M. Shah.

Shah had consolidated his hold over the party network in the six years during which the Sheikh Abdullah government was in power, following the Indira-Sheikh Accord of 1975. He had shadowed the Sheikh closely, and in the eyes of the NC workers, he was the Sheikh’s natural successor. But with Farooq’s coming, their hopes had been dashed; however, the question of who would take over after the Sheikh as Chief Minister was still open. The Sheikh occasionally hinted at Shah as a good choice for the position in an attempt, perhaps, to preserve the peace in the household.

Apart from party wrangling, Farooq faced an imminent threat from the dominant opposition party in the State—the Congress. It was in power at the Centre and virtually controlled the political process in the Valley. Farooq remembered well that his father was unceremoniously ousted from power and from the State by the Congress thrice—from 1953 to 1964 (11 years) the first time; from 1965 to 1968 (three years) the second; and for 18 months for the third time in 1971–72 when the Indo-Pak war broke out. He was allowed into the State after he signed the Indira-Sheikh Accord of 1975 in which he gave up his demand for plebiscite in Kashmir.

Farooq was also well aware that though the Abdullahs needed the Congress’ support to stay in power, it could not be trusted. The relationship between

Congress (I) (as the Congress was then known) and the NC was, therefore, one of a strained friendship. They tried to bury the hatchet for good, but hostility erupted frequently between the two.

At the August 21 rally too, crowds gave vent to their feelings against the Congress (I) when they raised ‘Where is Congress? Where is Congress?’ slogans while Farooq was being installed as the party chief. The Congress represented the Centre. The Sheikh had carefully cultivated an anti-Centre public stance while simultaneously emphasizing ‘personal friendship’ with the Nehru-Gandhi clan. It was a tightrope walk, but it served an important political purpose for the Sheikh.

Farooq intervened quickly that day to calm the crowd. “I am totally for conciliation and not for confrontation with the Centre and all others. Confrontation leads to destruction as was witnessed in 1947 when India and Pakistan confronted each other.”*

Predictably, he also brought the personal equations between the Abdullah and the Gandhi families into the mix. “Rajiv Gandhi telephoned me and wished me well. You know, there has been a life-long relationship between Pandit Nehru and my father, and also with the late Feroze Gandhi and Mrs Gandhi. I want to further my friendship on a similar pattern with Rajiv.”*

But before he could clarify the issue, his father burst out against the national broadcasters—Doordarshan and All India Radio. He accused them of not covering the ‘historic occasion’ of Farooq’s installation in full measure.

Moved by the frenzied accusations of his father against the Central government, Farooq rose, turned towards his father, and exclaimed dramatically, “I will not be your son if I do not shake all of India.”†

He lived up to the promise in later years.

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*Dubey, Suman. "Politics is more glamorous than anything: Sheikh Abdullah." India Today, 1981. Available at:
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*Ibid

†Ibid

Chapter

2

Farooq Abdullah liked being a Member of Parliament as much as he liked his game of golf and the evening soirees. He was relatively young, and therefore, carefully cultivated his indulgences. Politics was one of the indulgences, among the several others, which kept him occupied. And, like a true golfer, Farooq developed several putting partners on the fairways of the Delhi greens—contacts and friendships which spoke kindly about him and his political potential.

The father though was faced with several challenges when the 1980s began. His equation with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi rested precariously on a strange mix of love and hate. The Sheikh loved the fact that Indira Gandhi had found him indispensable for J&K. He hated her for not giving him the full and complete control of the State. She was watchful of the Sheikh's aspirations—and he didn't like her looking over his shoulder.

Soon after Sheikh Abdullah was brought back to power by Indira Gandhi (Congress Chief Minister Mir Qasim was asked to resign in his favour in 1975), widespread political turmoil broke out in the country. Mrs Gandhi imposed an Emergency to deal with the people's movement led by veteran socialist Jayaprakash Narayan.

The Sheikh kept a low profile through the 18 months of Emergency, but in 1977, Congress withdrew support from him and announced an election. While the National Conference won a handsome majority in the State, Indira Gandhi lost power in the Centre.

Sheikh Abdullah, buoyed by his win and the Congress' defeat, reasoned that the best days of Nehru's daughter were now behind her. He began hobnobbing with the ruling Janata Party constituents.

The coalition of disparate parties, which included the Bharatiya Janata Party, collapsed in 1980. The Sheikh's hasty outreach to the Opposition boomeranged. Mrs Gandhi rode back to power, and soon thereafter, dismissed nine non-Congress governments in the country. The Sheikh's government was spared, but he felt threatened. He could be the next one on the chopping board.

Sheikh Abdullah reacted the only way he could have. On the one hand, he looked to the PM for support, while on the other hand, he again reached out to other parties to form a non-Congress coalition with Srinagar as its political launch base. He wanted to create a pressure group which could stack up the bargaining chips in his favour in the dealings with Indira Gandhi.

Mirza Afzal Beg was roped in to test the waters in the opposition camp. Beg was the Sheikh's close confidante through his long political journey. He was also Deputy Chief Minister in the Sheikh's post-1975 Cabinet. Difference of opinion between the two, however, led to his sacking in 1978. He, thereafter, started his own outfit—the Inqalabi National Conference. Others, who were drafted to open an indirect dialogue with national opposition parties, included Janata Party State President Maulana Masoodi, Kashmir Political Conference Leader Ghulam Karra, and Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front President Sofi Mohammed Akbar. All of them were once close associates of Sheikh Abdullah, but fell into disuse after he came back to power.

The move was necessary to fend off criticism of the Sheikh government's below par performance between 1975 and 1980 and fortify himself as at the national level.

J&K Congress was already on the offensive against the Chief Minister. Senior Kashmir leaders, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed and Ghulam Rasool Kar, were keen for the Prime Minister to dismiss the National Conference government on charges of high corruption and administrative

incompetence. The State Congress (I) organized rallies and demonstrations to demand the removal. Regional political parties, they said, were a threat to national stability and security; the lessons from 1953 dismissal should be put to use.

The campaign stung Sheikh Abdullah. G.M. Shah hit back on behalf of the government. It is, he said, a 'malicious propaganda' over rising prices and shortages 'with the object of repeating the 1953 drama'. Sheikh Abdullah, who was the Prime Minister of J&K then (a title which was subsequently changed to Chief Minister), was deposed and put behind bars by the Centre in that year.

Indira Gandhi, on her part, nursed an ambivalent attitude towards the Sheikh. She had brought him back to power with the belief that he could be a trusted ally. She believed he would lend political stability to the Valley, and also be the counter point to Pakistan's attempt at 'internationalising the Kashmir issue'. She had also probably put his attempts to sideline her after her 1977 defeat in distant memory. But the Sheikh had moved to align himself with her adversaries once again. The State Congress' campaign against the government was, therefore, an attempt to put him on notice. She hoped that the Sheikh would redeem himself soon. She was in no hurry to take a decisive step against him.

The Congress campaign, however, pushed him into a corner. Charges of inefficiency and corruption eroded his personal image of an honest messiah of the people. He called his loyalists and discussed a Cabinet reshuffle to deflect the criticism. Senior party colleagues like Finance Minister D. D. Thakur dissuaded him. They argued it would lend credence to the Congress' charge of administrative inefficiency.

The Congress campaign in Kashmir notwithstanding, a raging agitation in Assam, another border state, and Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan on December 24, 1979, held Indira Gandhi's hand. The effects of the after-shocks of Soviet Union's occupation were visible in Pakistan, and to a limited extent, in Kashmir. The Prime Minister did not want to exacerbate the internal situation in the border state by pushing Sheikh Abdullah over the brink.

The Soviets, India's major international ally, were particularly sensitive to the mood in the Valley. They mobilized a massive effort to placate the Kashmiri Muslims. The Soviet Embassy in Delhi dispatched more than 10,000 copies of the Quran printed in Moscow for free distribution. It was a part of several attempts that were carried out to convince the Muslim population that the Soviet actions in Afghanistan were not motivated by a desire to liquidate Islamic culture and institutions.

The Soviet outreach did not help. The dangers posed to Islam by the Soviet occupation of Kabul became an issue in Kashmir. It was raised vociferously in the State Assembly by nearly a dozen legislators. They demanded a Soviet pull-out from Afghanistan, and a solution precluding the possibility of an armed clash between the two super powers 'on our soil'. The reference to Kashmir was politically critical.

Chief Minister Sheikh Abdullah added his own bit when he said Moscow's action in Afghanistan was guided by an anxiety to safeguard its interests in its central Asian empire populated mainly by Muslims. Even Communist countries like Romania did not support the Russian action, said the Sheikh fiercely in the first part of his speech before the State Assembly.

In the second part, he toned down the rhetoric. "The line adopted by Mrs Gandhi is right," he said amiably, "and we should do nothing different from that."

On the ground, he ordered a crackdown on communist workers. Communist literature was seized and its volunteers were arrested. The action was ostensibly necessary, he said, to prevent the recurrence of violence that had rocked the State following the hanging of Pakistan's ex-Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto on April 4, 1979.

While the Afghan question was under a hot debate, Congress leaders—State President Mufti Mohammad Sayeed and Youth Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad—received a boost to their campaign from Delhi. Home Minister Giani Zail Singh charged the National Conference with collaborating with communalists. He pointedly referred to the Sheikh's attempt to arrive at an understanding with the BJP in Hindu-dominated Jammu region of J&K.

Jammu contributed 32 representatives to the State Assembly. A tie-up with the right-wing Hindu party could wall out the Congress from J&K for good.

The Sheikh dismissed Zail Singh's charges as 'cheap propaganda'.

Indira Gandhi added an additional twist to the political plot when she handed an urn containing a part of her son Sanjay Gandhi's ashes to Farooq Abdullah for immersion in the rivers of Kashmir. Charismatic Sanjay, architect of his mother's return to power after a humiliating defeat in 1977, had died in an air crash in Delhi on June 23, 1980.

Sheikh Abdullah played on the personal equation with the Nehru-Gandhi family during the immersion of Sanjay's ashes. But alongside he said that the Kashmiris bore affinities towards those living on the other side of the border. On the one hand, he said, "We have thrown in our lot with India and we are not directly concerned with it (Pakistan). We would like the Kashmir issue to be settled between India and Pakistan so that we can devote our attention to peace and economic development of the State," while on the other hand, he harped, "We have similarities with Pakistan, but we are opposed to the two-nation theory. Muslims in Kashmir have a very strong psychological pull on that side. So, Pakistan exploits that pull because of religious affinities. We believe in secularism, though secularism still has to take roots in India."

Similarly, on the demand by Hindu nationalists to repeal Article 370, which gave J&K special status, the Sheikh minced no words. "The other states surrendered everything to the Centre but we didn't," he argued, "this is a federal structure. We were requested to join the Centre on certain terms and we said 'Yes'. Then we negotiated on the full settlement. With respect to the other states—they said, you better merge completely with the Centre, and they merged. The Centre should not step on the toes of the states and vice versa. The question of the power struggle will remain. We were probably alert enough to see the future. We agreed to give the Centre powers which we thought it should have. The residual, we kept to ourselves."

The 'pull' of religious affinities from across the Indo-Pakistan border and Article 370 offered the Sheikh an opportunity in adversity. He used both for his political purpose.

He had used such opportunities before too. When Nehru visited Kashmir for the first time in 1940, the Sheikh accorded him a 'historic' welcome and closely aligned himself with the Congress ideals of secularism, anti-feudalism, socialism and democracy. Four years later, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, leader of the All India Muslim League, announced his plans to visit the Valley with his communal agenda of two-nation theory. Surprisingly, the National Conference vied with the Muslim Conference to accord him a 'grand welcome'. Jinnah ignored the Sheikh. He chose to address the annual conference of the Muslim Conference which, he said, 'represented 99% of J&K Muslims'.

Cut up with the rejection, Sheikh Abdullah went back to the Congress and organized the NC's annual convention in 1945. Nehru, 'Frontier Gandhi' Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and Maulana Adul Kalam Azad attended the meeting in which the Sheikh reiterated his full support to the Indian cause—for Kashmir to be a part of India.

The Sheikh's dilemmas on firmly choosing between Nehru and Jinnah; or between long-term secular politics and Muslim politics, arose from the very nature of mass mobilization that he had undertaken in the Valley. The NC, and its earlier avatar as J&K Muslim Conference, had specifically agitated for emancipation of Muslim peasants from exploitation and oppression by the monarchical Dogra-Hindu system. The NC was, therefore, ideologically based on a deep sense of regional patriotism, chiefly centred in the Kashmir Valley. In this conception, Kashmir and India were fraternal, but ultimately separate entities, whose relations were to be governed by equality and mutual respect.

Sheikh Abdullah was also personally rooted in Kashmir's Muslim heritage in spite of his leftist orientation. His popularity with the masses owed much to his passionate recitation of long passages from the Quran in his speeches. The artful recitations often surcharged the crowds with their emotional religious appeal.

He had also cultivated his religious mass base in another manner. He and his associates controlled most of the mosques in Kashmir, and the well-respected cleric, Maulana Mohammed Sayyid Masoodi, was the general secretary of the party. He also established his political and militia

headquarters in Kashmir's ultimate symbol of Islam—the Hazratbal mosque in Srinagar in 1947. The mosque was the custodian of the Prophet's Holy Relic. It underlined the religious bedrock on which his political movement was built.

To a great extent, the NC's Muslim orientation was natural. J&K was a Muslim majority state with 77% of the population professing the faith. The Valley was even more overwhelmingly Muslim. About 95% of the people believed in Islam. Sheikh Abdullah couldn't jettison the regional ethos shaped by hundreds of years of history. He promised progressive social change, too, in line with his leftist leanings. The progressive urge led, in September 1944, to the adoption of a manifesto titled Naya Kashmir (New Kashmir). It outlined an ambitious programme for J&K's future under a democratic regime.

Earlier, in 1939, he had also persuaded his party men to change the name of J&K Muslim Conference to J&K National Conference so that it became an inclusive outfit. In his first presidential address, Sheikh Abdullah emphasized the secular nature of the Conference. He asserted that it stood for a struggle against oppression of all Kashmiris, and not just the Muslims.

But, between 1930–1940s and early 1980, the Jhelum River had over-run its banks more than once. The rhetoric of social, religious, and emotional 'pulls' from across the border became more useful than talk of the 'national' spirit.

Sheikh Abdullah was also under the pressure from the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami. The Jamaat wanted to internationalize the Kashmir issue in its own sectarian way. Clashes between army men and civilians over a traffic accident, in which six persons were killed, had led to agitations in several parts of the state. The incidents queered the pitch for the Sheikh's government.

The Chief Minister added to the simmering political cauldron when, at a public meeting to mark Kashmir Martyrs' Day (July 13, 1980), he thundered, "We will not allow anyone, whether he is a Hindu or Muslim, Pakistani or Indian, American or Russian, to play with our state's destiny." By putting Indians, Pakistanis, Russians and Americans in the same basket,

the Sheikh buttressed the Congress allegation that he was running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. The Congress saw a 'sinister design' in his politics.

Though the Sheikh later explained his statement as an 'emotional' one, the possibility of a political fallout unsettled him enough to dash off to New Delhi and seek a meeting with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. He reiterated that the emotional speech was not aimed to spark off a confrontation with the Centre, or to revive the separatist past. He underlined the efforts of his son, Farooq Abdullah, who, he said, vigorously defended the government in Parliament as a National Conference MP. Indira Gandhi heard him patiently.

The Sheikh came back to Srinagar and announced the issues were settled; the Prime Minister had assured him that she did not support her party's efforts to unseat him from the chief ministership.

However, within a few days, Indira Gandhi criticized NC's alleged involvement in encouraging communal parties like the Jan Sangh and Jamaat-e-Islami at a press conference in Delhi. She was particularly concerned about the Jamaat, and Sheikh Abdullah's indecisive attitude towards it.

Farooq Abdullah, stationed in Delhi by his father as an MP, played down her criticism. He talked of how the relationship between Indira Gandhi and his father 'basically works', though she sometimes felt the Sheikh didn't listen to her. "Congress (I) members seem to be of the opinion that the more waves they make in Kashmir, and the more they pester her, she may have to do something extra-constitutional to control the situation. I sympathize with the pressures working on her." He was clearly hinting that it was the PM who was under pressure, and not his father.

Paradoxically, while Mrs Gandhi blamed the Sheikh for indirectly extending help to the Jamaat, he groped for her support in view of the Jamaat's threat to him. Any hint of the weakening of the Central support to the Sheikh was bound to give a boost to extremist elements in J&K. Given the confused signals, the Jamaat, which equivocated on its position on the merger of Kashmir with India, flexed its muscles at regular intervals. Its

global Islamic connections, spurred by the rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism in neighbouring countries, put the Kashmir situation in a delicate balance.

The Jamaat's youth wing, the Jamiat-e-Tulba, planned an international conference on Islamic Revolution to shore up its rhetoric. International delegations were invited to it to espouse an Iran-type Islamic Revolution. The Sheikh declared that he would not allow his State to become the 'cockpit of international rivalries'. He ordered them to call off the conference. The Tulba fell in line.

The goings-on in Sheikhdom, as Sheikh Abdullah's Kashmir was referred to in jest by his rivals, continued to get more curious. In June 1980, National Conference MLA Mian Bashir defected to Congress. The Congress' strength in the J&K Assembly was 8 as compared to 47 of the NC. The Sheikh tried to persuade the Speaker to expel the MLA from the Assembly as per the anti-defection law passed by the House in September 1979.

The Speaker, Malik Mohiuddin, refused to comply. He cited the stay order that Bashir had obtained from the High Court. Irked by the stand, and also the fact that he was a close associate of the Sheikh's rival Mirza Afzal Beg, the Sheikh decided to get rid of the Speaker himself.

"I was pressurized and constantly coerced since early August," Mohiuddin complained, "They even threatened to kill me and burn my house. All I can say is, that I was subjected to intense harassment."*

National Conference legislators also created bedlam in the Assembly over a no-confidence motion against the Speaker. It was an absurd situation—the Speaker was trapped in disallowing a no-confidence against himself! Mohiuddin resigned in a huff.

If the peculiarity was not enough, the J&K State Assembly mysteriously caught fire soon after the Speaker quit. Both the ruling party and the opposition hinted at sabotage. "Two days later, five houses in the centre of the city were gutted; a day later yet, another section of the Assembly house was ablaze. With such dark forces of ignominy working almost simultaneously last month, insiders saw dire portents for the future. Indeed,

opposition MLAs went so far as to complain of evil omens—one of them pointing to the hooting of owls outside the MLAs' Hostel which caused occupants sleepless nights,” India Today reported.

“To the rest of the country, unconnected though these reported snatches of news may appear, they are not without a certain familiarity when they happen in Kashmir. Why is it that as the season turns, as the business of Government moves its venue for the winter that, with almost unfailing regularity, a crisis is triggered off in Kashmir? Is it a symbol of the in-built insecurity of the Kashmiri temperament, an eruption of Kashmiri chauvinism, or is it in fact, an insidious political malaise that is as incurable as it is inscrutable.”

The report also observed: “Looked at from another perspective, from the narrower confines of a small town dense with political pygmies crowding around a single giant, the emphasis shifts from a regional crisis to a locally-made one, and the political paranoia of a whole creed to perhaps that of a few individuals. ‘What is happening here,’ says a senior civil servant in Srinagar, ‘isn’t a burning national issue, it’s petty tribal warfare among the local chieftains.’”*

*Sethi, Sunil. “Paranoia plagues Jammu & Kashmir and its leaders.” India Today, 1981. Available at:
<https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19801115-paranoia-plagues-jammu-kashmir-and-its-leaders-821613-2014-01-04>

*Ibid

Chapter

3

“I would like to see modern people come in with modern outlook. There’ve been too many stale men running the show these past few years!” Farooq Abdullah remarked with a chuckle soon after succeeding his father as president of the National Conference.

He didn’t consider himself a greenhorn in politics even at the early stage of his career, though he was sure he was young enough to lead a generational shift to his brand of charm politics.

Standing over six feet tall, his size 12 feet encased in Peshawari chappals, sporting a salwar-kameez or black achkan and astrakhan cap, Farooq, with the characteristic twinkle in his mischievous eyes, made a dashing figure. His soft, velvety voice, restless hands and his easy ways were naturally primed to seduce the toughest of politicians into a marriage of convenience. He intuitively knew when to get involved and when to leave—a trait that stood him in good stead through his long innings in Kashmir politics.

Farooq was born on October 21, 1937, in Soura near Srinagar. His mother, Begum Akbar Jehan Abdullah, was the daughter of a European, Michael Harry Nedou. Michael Harry was the son of Michael Adam Nedou, who belonged to the medieval port city of Ragusa (Dubrovnik) in Croatia. Adam was an architect by profession. He came to India to construct a palace for a maharaja in Gujarat and turned into a hotelier after completing the assignment. He built his first hotel in Lahore in 1880. The graceful building was adjacent to Mela Ram Building and faced Lahore’s famous Mall Road.

Nedous Hotel is now known as Avari Hotel. He later added two more hotels, one in Srinagar, and another in Gulmarg, to the Nedou name.

Adam's son, Harry Nedou, was a businessman; his brothers, Willy and Wally, 'willed and wallied' around; while his sister, Enid, took charge of the catering. Her pâtisserie at their Lahore hotel was considered 'as good as anything in Europe'.

Harry was at his lodge in Gulmarg when he met Mir Jan, a Kashmiri Gujjar girl, who had come to deliver milk to his residence. He was immediately smitten by her looks and decided to pursue her. She was suspicious of his intentions. "I might be poor," she told him, "but I am not for sale." Harry pleaded he was serious; that he loved her, he wanted to marry her. "In that case," she retorted, "You must convert to Islam. I cannot marry an unbeliever." To her surprise, he embraced Islam and married her. They had 12 children, of which only five survived. §§§

Akbar Jehan was one of their daughters. She had her early education at the Convent of Jesus and Mary in the hill resort of Murree. In 1928, Akbar Jehan completed her schooling and returned to Lahore, where she met Sheikh Abdullah. They got married in Srinagar in 1933 and she, thereafter, became involved in the struggle for a new Kashmir. She raised money to build schools for poor children and encouraged adult education in a state where a bulk of the population was illiterate. She also, crucially, gave support and advice to her husband, and alerted him, for example, to the dangers of succumbing to Nehru's charm.

She fought bitterly with him over his decision to convert J&K Muslim Conference into a broad nationalist platform called J&K National Conference. She argued that he should not be 'intoxicated with the wine of Nehru's nationalism' and instead emphasize the 'Muslimness' of the Conference. Muslim Conference meetings used to begin with long recitations from the Quran and cries of Allah-hu-Akbar. The Sheikh wished to do away with the practice in order to accommodate leaders from other faiths.

Akbar Jehan argued back and forth with the Sheikh for several weeks, and when he refused to change his mind, she left her marital home in a huff. She

stayed at her parental home for nearly two weeks till her brother persuaded her against breaking her marriage over a political issue. She, ironically, did not hesitate in dispatching her eldest male child, Farooq, to Christian missionaries-run Tyndale Biscoe School in Srinagar for his early schooling.

Farooq was energetic and playful as a child; scared of nothing except for horror movies, particularly Dracula. His fangs dripping with blood frightened him enough to shut his eyes tight as soon as he advanced towards the victim. But he couldn't help but watch the movies again and again. Snakes and injections also held their own terror for him. When cholera shots were to be given to him, he ran to the third floor of his home and hid himself in a way that he could not be found for a long time.

Farooq was 16 when his father, the Prime Minister of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, was arrested on charges of sedition in 1953. The family's fortune, which was at its crest, went into a sudden downswing. A year later, Farooq left Srinagar to join Sawai Man Singh Medical College in Jaipur, and graduated with an MBBS in 1961.

One of the important things he learnt in college was the art of wooing girls. He drew inspiration from Hindi film heroes like Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor. "It was simple—whenever I was in a serious mood, I reeled off Dilip Kumar's lines, and for mushy romance I used Raj Kapoor's dialogues." He idolized Madhubala for her fairy-like charm and Helen—"she was something else!" he confessed.

Farooq's first experience of the dust and din of politics was during the 1963 agitation over the theft of the Moi-e-Muqqadas, a strand from the beard of Prophet Muhammad, from the Hazratbal shrine in Srinagar. It revealed to him the power that suitably galvanized people could wield. It also showed him the hold of religion on the psyche of Kashmiri people.

Farooq himself had been exposed to a multicultural life—his maternal grandfather was a European like his wife, who came from a Christian family. Religion did not really matter to him personally. But the politics of religion caught his eye at an early stage of life; as did the tactics of keeping New Delhi on the edge.

Young Farooq had also accompanied his father to Pakistan in 1964 on a peace mission specially greenlit by Prime Minister Nehru. Ironically, the trip was spurred by Nehru after he had jailed Sheikh Abdullah for 11 years on charges of receiving funds and explosives from Pakistan to topple Kashmir's elected government and align himself with Pakistan. The theft of the Holy Relic from Hazratbal in the last week of December 1963, and the public backlash, however, forced Nehru to circle back to the Sheikh in May 1964. He was set free and dispatched to Pakistan to initiate a firm dialogue on Kashmir and Indo-Pak relations.

Sheikh Abdullah's welcome in Pakistan exceeded all expectations. He was eulogized to heady levels, and at one point, it seemed as if the foundation of a working solution to the Kashmir issue had been laid. Unfortunately, Nehru died on May 27, 1964, and Sheikh Abdullah returned to India post-haste.

The visit to Pakistan buoyed the Sheikh's aspirations. He decided to explore international waters. He was, perhaps, encouraged to do so by the Pakistan establishment during his visit to the country. "I am going for Haj," he announced before emplaning for Algiers on an Indian passport in which his nationality was marked as 'Kashmiri Muslim'. The issuance of the strange passport still remains a mystery.

Sheikh Abdullah arrived in Algiers in March 1965. Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai was in the city for an international event. The Sheikh claimed Premier Zhou 'suddenly dropped in one morning' to meet him. What transpired at the meeting is not known, but the Sheikh did mention the Kashmir issue had come up in the context of the boundary dispute between India and China.

The Sheikh's meeting with Zhou on foreign soil caused outrage across India's political spectrum. Government of India ordered him to quickly perform Haj and return to India, otherwise his passport would be cancelled. The meeting was especially ill-timed as the relationship between China and India had not healed after the bitter war barely three years ago. In the Indo-Pakistan context too, the border was alive with skirmishes in the Rann of Kutch area.

The Zhou-Sheikh meeting, in fact, was not a 'chance encounter'. It was arranged by Pakistan at the behest of Beijing. Pakistan leaders had briefed the Sheikh on its plans to stoke internal disturbance in Kashmir via Operation Gibraltar and to start a war with India during his visit to the country. They told him that Shastri was a weak PM and would not be able to lead a viable defence against Pakistan's frontal and internal assault. The time was ripe to grab Kashmir from India.

China had its own axe to grind. It was still peeved that India had hosted the Dalai Lama after he escaped from Lhasa in the wake of Chinese occupation of Tibet. It wanted to pay back India in the same coin by hosting Sheikh Abdullah's Kashmir government-in-exile.

Excerpts of the transcript of the meeting between the Chinese Premier and Pakistan Foreign Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, which was held on April 2, 1965, when the Sheikh was still on Haj, refer to the mechanizations in an obvious manner:

Zhou: (Sheikh Mohammad) Abdullah's recent trip abroad was very effective. I reiterated Marshal Chen Yi's invitation to him.

Bhutto: We are very grateful.

Zhou: If he goes to China, he can talk about the situation in Kashmir. However, he has still not decided when to visit China. What worries him is his passport. He says that he must give it careful consideration. I asked him if he would be arrested on his return. He said that even if he were arrested on his return to Kashmir, it would be worth it. I think that such a spirit of sacrifice is good, but once arrested one loses the opportunity for action. Of course, this is a matter of personal interest, and the decision is for him to decide. Perhaps he thinks that remaining in Kashmir is more meaningful. If he should go abroad, India would say that he has been influenced by Pakistan.

Bhutto: I am very grateful to China for inviting Abdullah to visit China. Marshal Chen Yi and I were saying that Abdullah, imprisoned for 11 years, really does not understand the situation in the world. He should have contact with the outside world. The United States has done a lot for him. Of

the articles that he has published since his release, there are two that I really dislike. It would be beneficial to have him go to China to see China's development. India's position is contradictory. India and China have diplomatic relations and, even when conflict between China and India is at its most intense, there is no break in these relations. So, India should let Abdullah visit China as if he were visiting London or somewhere else.

Zhou: It would be great if he also went to Cairo and Algiers.

Bhutto: After China invited Abdullah to visit China, the Indian Parliament was struck with panic and lost its balance. Some members of parliament are worried that he would go to China, establish in Xinjiang a government in exile, and liberate Kashmir.

Zhou: India supports the Dalai Lama as its puppet and fears that China will do the same. This is gauging the heart of a gentleman with one's own mean measure.

Bhutto: If India does not provide him a visa to visit China, we can issue one.*

The Sheikh was in two minds after the Indian government ordered him to return home. He knew there will be consequences of his grave mistake in India. He could, however, avoid going to jail once again if he stayed back in a friendly country. The invitation from China played on his mind too.

Renowned Islamic scholar, Ali Miyan of Lucknow, was also in Mecca for Haj. The Sheikh requested him to perform Istikhara prayer and seek divine guidance on his dilemma.

“I told him no doubt your arrest on return is certain but then they will have to release you after some time and you can continue your movement in your homeland which is not as easy being in a foreign country.”†

Sheikh Abdullah returned to New Delhi on May 8, 1965. He and Mirza Afzal Beg were deplaned, arrested under Defence of India Rules, and immediately flown to Ootacamund in South India. His wife and attendants were allowed to go home.

The Abdullah family fortunes were again in the balance. India-Pakistan war also broke out. Farooq immigrated to Britain to practise medicine and married Mollie, a nursing assistant, on September 14, 1968. The couple had three daughters; Safia, Hinna and Sara, and a son, Omar Abdullah.

Farooq and family returned in 1976 after his father became the Chief Minister once again. He reverted to Indian citizenship and took over as honorary director of the Sher-e-Kashmir National Medical Institute Trust in Srinagar.

Farooq did not involve himself substantially in Kashmir politics even after he became a Member of Parliament in 1980. His father occupied the spotlight; Farooq was happy to be in the shadows. He occasionally signalled his interest in politics, but was always wary of upsetting the Sheikh's inner circle, especially his elder brother-in-law, G.M. Shah.

The years of Sheikh's stewardship were filled with controversial and arbitrary decisions. Muted whispers about him and his family made their rounds in the streets and in the corridors of power. They blew into public spotlight with the publication of a pamphlet in March 1982.

Abid Husain Khan of Hyderabad was the author of the 'book' titled Life of Sheikh Abdullah—An Open Book. The timing of the publication was just right. It hit the streets when the Budget Session of the Assembly was to open.

Abid Husain's book, also referred to as the 'Red Book', alleged that Sheikh Abdullah had a 'dark life, shady character and unscrupulous nature'. He was, the 34-page pamphlet added, the 'richest fox of the state whose immovable assets are estimated to be worth more than Rs 20 crores'.

It detailed the properties 'acquired' by the Sheikh through 'misuse of official power and political influence' and carried photographs of each one of them. It alleged that the Sheikh acquired a large parcel of government land at Gupkar (where the Abdullachs built their family home), Srinagar, along with a three-storeyed building called Dhanji bhai, worth Rs 50 lakhs, for just Rs 4 lakhs. The family had also encroached on government and forest lands adjoining its farmland in Tangmarg (Gulmarg), and rented out

their family home at Soura to the Sher-e-Kashmir Medical Institute Trust headed by the Sheikh himself for an exorbitant Rs 2,000 a month.

The 'Red Book' claimed that the Chief Minister had promoted his family members. His youngest son, Dr Mustafa Kamal, headed Tangmarg district hospital for 14 years in violation of a rule which limited postings to three years. The elder one, Tariq Abdullah, was appointed the chairman of J&K Tourism Development Corporation soon after Sheikh Abdullah became the CM. Sheikh Abdullah also appointed his wife to several government organizations, and his son-in-law, G.M. Shah, to several powerful positions, including the National Conference's Nawa-i-Subh Publications Trust. The book claimed that the trust acquired prime land in Srinagar for an annual rent of Rs 4 only.

The 'Red Book' pointed out that Farooq Abdullah and his British wife imported two foreign cars in 1975 as a donation to the medical institute and were, therefore, exempted from paying duty on them. But the vehicles were not given to the institute. They were instead put at their disposal for personal use.

The pamphlet also recorded instances of bribes, selection practices and real estate deals brokered by the Abdullah family. Most of these allegations were already in public domain as the Sheikh's bitter critic, Shamim Ahmed Shamim, had written a series of evidence-based articles on them in a newspaper Aina between 1977 and 1980. The compilation of the 'facts', with photostat copies of documents relating to land deals, put the family squarely in the dock. As many as 50,000 copies in English and 25,000 in Urdu were circulated by the fictitious author.

Though Sheikh Abdullah ignored the pamphlets, National Conference was quick to react. It issued a rejoinder—In the Crucible of Judgment—authored by fictitious Abdul Rashid. The land deeds, it said, were regularized by the Cabinet and the allegations were 'distorted concocted stories' aimed at 'character assassination' of the most 'loved leader of Kashmir'. It rubbished the allegation that the land at Gupkar allotted to Begum Abdullah was worth Rs 40 lakhs, or the 44-kanal land deal with Sher-e-Kashmir Medical Institute was not above board. The land lease to

the Nawa-i-Subh was in public interest to encourage ‘healthy journalism in the State’.

Farooq Abdullah was not satisfied with the fictitious response to the fictitious author of the ‘Red Book’. It agitated him. “I or my father have nothing to hide. The ‘Red Book’ is just another attempt to malign Sheikh sahib’s character, it’s another political game the Congress (I) have resorted to, hoping that with the mud-slinging some mud will stick,” he lashed out angrily.

Farooq claimed he spent his ‘hard earned money’ to buy the cars for 6,000 pounds (Rs 1.08 lakhs) and donated them to the Medical Institute. Since the cars developed mechanical defects, they would be now auctioned off for more than Rs 1 lakh each and the money would go to the Institute. “The Congress (I) will not succeed in their attempt to malign us. I will bury them under their own ‘Red Book’.”

The Opposition hit back. Bhim Singh, President of the Panthers Party, placed nine government orders in the Assembly. They pertained to the transfer and allotment of government land by ‘arbitrary orders of the government in favour of the wife, sons, brother-in-law and son-in-law of the Chief Minister’. He demanded a high-level inquiry into the corrupt practices of the family.

State Law Minister D.D. Thakur dismissed the demand. “I am shocked to hear such allegations against Sheikh sahib whom we consider above any kind of corruption,” he said and asked for the closure of the issue. The haste to close the issue stemmed from the precedent of former Chief Minister Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad. Similar allegations against him had led to his conviction on 11 counts of corruption, and 6 of abuse of authority.

The ‘Red Book’ controversy did not materialize into an impartial inquiry into Abdullah family’s alleged acts of corruption. It did, however, rip away some of the halo from Sheikh Abdullah’s claim of good governance and honest administration.

The Sheikh buried the controversy through a deft political manoeuvre. He tabled and passed a controversial Bill—The Jammu & Kashmir Grant of

Permit for Resettlement in (or Permanent Return to) the State Act 1982—in the State Assembly. The legislation stipulated: ‘Any person who was a State Subject before 14 May, 1954, and has migrated to Pakistan after 1947 could be recommended for resettlement in the state on scrutiny by the state authorities.’

In other words, residents of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir—about 10 lakh people—could claim to be State Subjects at any time. The law specifically applied to some 1000–odd families, originally from J&K, who were settled in Pakistan. The provisions sparked off a furore.

The ruling party defended the enactment on the grounds that it was in pursuance of Section 6 of the J&K State Constitution and the 2nd proviso to Article 7 of the Union Constitution. It cited the Delhi Agreement of 1948 wherein a specific provision was included for ‘ensuring the rights and privileges of citizenship to those Kashmiris who went to Pakistan in the wake of the disturbances of 1947 or in fear of them’. It also required prospective returnees to swear allegiance to the Indian Constitution.

“In any case, many of them would not come back. Only 117 persons have returned since 1947. But we cannot deny them their rights. They are free to return to their home any time,” Sheikh Abdullah told the Assembly.

The argument cut no ice with opposition parties. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) called it a ‘mischievous piece of legislation’ and threatened to launch an agitation against it.

Government of India said it had not been consulted. The State government countered that the Chief Minister had written to the Union Home Minister in August 1981 about it and a copy was sent to New Delhi in October.

Official bickering apart, the most vocal opponents of the legislation were the three lakh non-Muslim refugees who had migrated from West Pakistan between 1965 and 1971. They had been allotted evacuees’ land in the Jammu border areas. They wanted the privileges as State Subjects of J&K. The State government tossed the ball right back to the Centre. “Since they cannot be called permanent residents of the State, their fate can be decided by the Central Government alone,” it said.

The Regional Press went full throttle after the controversial legislation. It said that Sheikh Abdullah had brought the legislation to divert ‘public attention and play on the religious sentiments of the masses’. National Conference mouthpiece Nawa-i-Subh agreed that the Bill had stoked religious sentiments, but it blamed the opponents of the Sheikh for raking up the issue. They were, it said, ‘desperate to carve out a constituency for themselves in the State on communal lines’.

The Sheikh ignored the outcry. The Assembly passed the legislation and it was sent to the Governor, B.K. Nehru, for his assent. He referred it to the Attorney General of India for legal opinion.

The Constitution stipulates that in case the Governor returns a Bill for reconsideration, it can either be dropped or passed again by the State legislature. In case it is passed again, the Governor is bound to grant assent to it.

The controversy simmered to a boiling point as Kashmir entered the summer months. The Sheikh had deflected the debate on the ‘Red Book’, but he had opened yet another chapter in the tussle for supremacy between New Delhi and Srinagar, between Hindu refugees from Pakistan and Muslims who had opted to go to Pakistan in 1947. The timing and its far-reaching implications were obvious to all concerned, but Sheikh Abdullah stood firm. The Muslim-majority Valley backed him and the Bill to the hilt. Sheikh Abdullah had thrown an ace. The bargaining chips were with him now.

*Ali, Tariq. “Bitter Chill.” London Review of Books. April 19, 2001.
Available at: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v23/n08/tariq-ali/bitter-chill-of-winter>

*“Record of Premier Zhou Enlai’s Conversation with Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Bhutto.” General Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Printed on

April 14, 1965. Available at:
[https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/165418.pdf?
v=62f6438c885bbbde4f67d970daf87085](https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/165418.pdf?v=62f6438c885bbbde4f67d970daf87085)

†Abul Hasan Ali Hasani Nadwi, Maulana Sayyid. *Karvaan-i-Zindagi*
(India: Maktabae Islam, 1999)

Chapter

4

G. M. Shah was a short, stocky man who hid his eyes behind heavily tinted glasses. He possessed a sharp tongue though that could move crowds when he spoke with fervour, and a certain impatience. He, it was largely believed, was a man of religion; a man of principles who could not compromise the interest of his people.

Shah was essentially an organization man. He had devoted his life to build National Conference from scratch. He was married to Sheikh Abdullah's eldest daughter, Khalida. The couple shared a close rapport with the Sheikh. While Khalida managed her father's politics from his home, along with her mother Akbar Jehan, Shah kept the NC cadre in line with Sheikh Abdullah's vision and plans.

He was an effective minister too, who ruled with a heavy hand. Some of his administrative methods were said to be 'ruthless'. The critics, therefore, said that Shah was hot-headed, stubborn and arrogant—that he was a man consumed by the virtues of his own ideas and an unrelenting sense of self-importance. They had led him to believe that he was indispensable; he was, hence, the natural successor to the Sheikh's political legacy. His supporters, on the other hand, said that he was devoted to public service and had a heart of gold. He was, therefore, loved and respected by NC workers and leaders.

But stories of Shah's tantrums abounded in Srinagar. He had physically manhandled people on several occasions. The people he 'assaulted' included a school teacher, a bus conductor, a junior police official, an

executive engineer, etc. Sheikh's personal intervention avoided public embarrassment on each of these occasions.

It did not bother Shah too much. "Let me be truthful . . . this is my biggest weakness, this has made me controversial," he admitted candidly on more than one occasion. He had resigned from different posts three times in a fit of anger and self-righteousness when he did not have his way. The Sheikh took the outbursts in good humour and persuaded the son-in-law to rejoin him in his political work.

G.M. Shah's other weakness was coffee. He was devoted to drinking endless cups of strong coffee throughout the day. He was also obsessed with his grave. He chose a spot in the family graveyard in Srinagar and had his grave dug. Every Friday he went to the cemetery to inspect it. He often descended into the pit, lay down in the soft soil and gave instructions on how it could do with more elbow room or head space. He wanted to ensure the fit was right when he was finally laid to rest.

Personal quirks apart, Shah had the Sheikh's confidence. Even though Sheikh publicly said his successor 'should be thrown up by the party and people', he later confessed, "I have no intention of appointing one." He toyed with the idea of Shah taking over from him more than once. The first occasion was shortly after Farooq became an MP in 1980. The Sheikh was down with ill-health and he sounded out Shah for a possible take-over of chief ministerial responsibilities.

"I have very little time left now . . . my end is fast approaching," the Sheikh said to Shah, "Why don't you take over from me?"

Shah asked for time to think over it. He went home and discussed it with his wife. Next morning, he responded to his father-in-law plainly, "As long as the last breath remains in you, I cannot even consider taking over from you." The moment passed.

Farooq Abdullah's presence in Srinagar began to tell on the Sheikh. He appointed him as party president much to the discomfiture of Shah. The only take-over from Sheikh that remained now was the chief ministership of Jammu and Kashmir.

On June 8, 1982, Sheikh Abdullah fell ill again after a hectic trip to Doda. As fears about Sheikh's survival grew, Shah and Farooq started to position themselves in and outside of the party. While Shah waited for word from Sheikh Abdullah, Farooq reached out to Delhi. He had factored in the possibility of the Centre, especially Indira Gandhi, playing a decisive role in the succession battle.

The Prime Minister arrived in Srinagar for a four-day vacation on June 24. She was accompanied by her son Rajiv and his wife Sonia. Farooq and Rajiv were already good friends.

Indira Gandhi also brought expert medical aid from Delhi and Chandigarh to attend to the Sheikh. The doctors, however, uncovered fresh problems. They discovered that the Sheikh's persistent stomach aches were not recurring attacks of diarrhoea. They were caused by interrupted blood supply to the intestines. Sheikh Abdullah had an enlarged heart and diabetes. He had a heart attack a couple of days before he was scheduled to visit Jaslok Hospital in Bombay for a kidney check-up.

Five years earlier, in 1977, Sheikh Abdullah had survived a heart attack. He had quickly returned to public life, surprising his doctors. He led the NC during the 1977 Assembly elections from his sick bed. In fact, when news reached him that the National Conference base in the Valley may suffer a dent because of the growing popularity of the Janata Dal, he called a public meeting immediately.

Sheikh Abdullah arrived at the venue in an ambulance. He was carried to the stage on a stretcher and laid down on a cot. His walking stick was placed in his hand and, as speakers made a pitch for the National Conference nominees in the elections, the Sheikh tapped the stick on the wooden floor to rouse public sympathy for himself and the party. The sympathy vote won him a big victory.

Indira Gandhi drove directly to Sheikh Abdullah's residence on June 24, 1982, to inquire about his health. The visit yielded political results, and as Sheikh's condition improved because of expert medical intervention, the Congress and the NC decided to de-escalate tensions between them. The controversial Resettlement Bill, they agreed, would be returned unapproved

to the Assembly by the Governor. The NC would then not take it up for the second round of discussion and let it die a natural death.

The other important outcome was that Sheikh Abdullah agreed to support Congress' candidate Zail Singh in the forthcoming elections to the office of President of India. He had earlier favoured H.R. Khanna, the opposition nominee. G.M. Shah and other NC leaders, who were vehemently against Singh, were forced to fall in line with the issuance of a Whip to NC legislators to vote for Zail Singh.

Farooq played the mediator between his father and Indira Gandhi. "We have never wanted confrontation with the Centre, although there is a continuous confrontation with the State Congress (I) unit," he remarked playing both the sides of the party again.

Though Indira Gandhi's move got her NC votes, it divided her party. Congress State President Mufti Mohammad Sayeed was unhappy with it, while his rival, Syed Mir Qasim, expressed satisfaction with the rapprochement.

Frail Sheikh Abdullah was also being worked upon by his family members on the issue of succession. Indira Gandhi knew of the pressures on him, and during the course of her conversation with the Kashmir leader, suggested that Farooq should be inducted into the State Cabinet as a senior minister in the run up to the final succession. She dissuaded Sheikh Abdullah from considering Shah as a likely candidate. It had to be his son, no one else, she told him. The Sheikh's wife Begum Akbar Jehan and his daughter Khalida did not favour the idea. They feared it would split the family.

The Sheikh, it seemed, had made up his mind. On the intervening night of July 7 and 8, around 2.30 a.m., he urgently summoned Shah to his bedside. His breathing was laborious; he could barely speak. He once again asked Shah to take over as Chief Minister on his passing. Shah held his hand for a while, and said he would pray for his father-in-law's quick return to good health and many more years of stewardship.

The incident made it clear that even as the Sheikh feared that life was ebbing away, he hadn't reconciled with the idea of Farooq taking over an

administrative role. He probably felt that there was something amiss about Farooq. He had, therefore, turned to Shah once again. But it was too late. Farooq and Shah could not get along.

Shah was up-to-date on the pressures on his father-in-law and he started to assert himself. The acrimony in the family soon became a public gossip. Farooq was forced to issue an official note, which denied that 'the National Conference is the victim of intra-party rivalry'. He specifically said, "The reports that my brother-in-law Ghulam Mohammad Shah and myself are antagonist to each other are baseless and tendentious."

The denial notwithstanding, the two sides drew up the battle-lines. Forest Minister G.N. Kochak mobilized support for Shah in the NC legislature party. Finance Minister D.D. Thakur led the counter-offensive for Farooq. "We found we not only had the support of the majority, but an overwhelming majority," Thakur boasted.

Word of mobilization reached Sheikh Abdullah. He called a meeting of the legislature party on August 7. "Shah and Farooq are like my two eyes," he said. The hint was obvious—he was excruciatingly torn between the love for his son and the steadfastness of his son-in-law. He couldn't do away with either; he needed them both.

The statement made Farooq nervous. His father was vacillating. He could queer the pitch for him in a moment of weakness. He had to act immediately.

Farooq launched his offensive on August 9 in a party meeting organized to mark the 29th anniversary of the Sheikh's deposition in 1953. He first lashed out at corrupt ministers. They will not get party tickets in the future elections, he said, and then warned party men against idolising individual leaders. "I forbid you from raising slogans like Gul Shah Padshah (Shah is King)," he said in an angry tone. Shah was present on the dais with him. He was incensed. He decided to take the bull by its horns.

Independence Day was around the corner. In the absence of Chief Minister Sheikh Abdullah, protocol dictated that the number 2, Finance Minister D.D. Thakur, should take the salute at the flag hoisting ceremony. Shah

insisted he would take the salute in Srinagar. Thakur could officiate in Jammu.

The suggestion was not accepted. Shah then proposed the ceremony should be downgraded and the Divisional Commissioner should do the honours. The Administration and the army protested the unusual move. Chief Minister Sheikh Abdullah intervened at his juncture and, on August 14, directed Thakur to take the salute in Srinagar.

Shah did not let go. He announced a three-day camp at Ganderbal, 30 kilometres away, and sent invitations for lunch to all ministers on August 15. The event was timed to keep them away from the parade. He sent the invitation to the Sheikh and his Begum, too.

Sheikh Abdullah immediately saw that the absence of ministers would create a furore outside the State, and on the evening of August 14, sent urgent wireless messages to ministers to be at the parade ground at 9 a.m. All ministers attended the Independence Day celebrations, except Shah. He had ordered the wireless set to be switched off. Shah was also absent from the Governor's 'At Home' in the evening.

Shah was in a terrible mood. He stayed away from Cabinet meetings held on August 16 and 17. Though Sheikh was disappointed in his son-in-law, he made a last-ditch effort to coax him into a rapprochement. He sent four ministers to talk to Shah. He bluntly told them that if the Sheikh wanted to induct Farooq into the Cabinet, he should first ask the legislature party. He also handed over his resignation to the delegation. The Sheikh accepted it and decided to implement Indira Gandhi's suggestion. After 18 months of indecision, he finally took the pivotal step.

On August 23, 1982, Governor B.K. Nehru administered the oath of office to Dr Farooq Abdullah as the State's Health Minister. The grateful son, his eyes full of tears, embraced his mother, and thereafter, his father sitting in a low chair. The Sheikh was momentarily overwhelmed. His eyes turned moist. After a few moments, he was helped to his feet and guided to the Mercedes Benz parked a few steps away.

For all practical purposes, the Lion of Kashmir had anointed his own as the new Lord of the Valley. He rarely attended public functions thereafter, and his meeting hours with colleagues, friends and public were limited to a small part of mornings and evenings when he was brought to the lush lawns of his residence for fresh air.

Farooq's initial forays into the rough and tumble of politics were less than successful in the initial years. His first year as an NC president had nothing to show for an achievement. Shah's interference in the party reduced Farooq to a 'darkhast president'—in other words, he could do nothing except forward petitions to the government. He, therefore, played golf or mingled with his friends to while away his time. The appointment as Health Minister did not induce him to break step. He didn't go to office on his first day; he instead played golf.

Delhi backed Farooq against hardliner Shah. The latter, who talked of 'limited accession', had spent eight-and-a-half years in jail and three-and-a-half years in exile from the time of his first arrest in 1946. Shah was anti-Congress. He was against a political understanding with it and opposed his brother-in-law's soft friendly approach towards the party. He had warned Farooq that an alliance would forever bury the NC in the Valley.

Shah's fear was based on the fact that the NC's image had taken a beating since 1977. The Sheikh's charisma and people's sentiment for him may have carried the day on previous occasions, but there was no corner in Kashmir where the talk of corruption and administrative irregularities did not ring loud. There was enough substance on record that lent even loose talk on the street some credibility. The mud flung at the Sheikh and his family, especially after the publication of the 'Red Book', had stuck with embarrassing tenacity.

They were not the only warts showing in the NC's body politic. The Sheikh's younger son, Tariq Abdullah—the chubby, balding bachelor—who was the Managing Director of J&K Tourism Development Corporation since 1975 had caused its ruination.

Tourism was the biggest revenue source for the government, and before Tariq took over the corporation, its grand hotels, cottages and reception

centres were the first choice of tourists from around the world. Tariq, however, managed to take JKTDC to its very nadir, and earned the reputation of being a ‘whimsical despot’ for himself in the process.

His office was in the middle of once carefully manicured lawns of the Tourist Reception Centre, Srinagar. It became out of bounds for most of his staff after he took over because he found them to be ‘undesirable elements’. He spent his time sitting alone in a stately chamber lined with cobwebs. The three telephones on his desk were all ‘dead’ because he refused to pay ‘excessive bills’.

Tariq also insisted that corporation employees, who kept the tourists’ facilities functional, were ‘useless’. In a fit of pique, he dismissed 500 of them. They were subordinate staff—gardeners, waiters, cooks and drivers. He gave no official reason for their dismissal—it was a simple, straight forward diktat. Nobody dared to question the Sheikh’s son.

Some of the dismissed employees, however, moved court. It held that the dismissals were ‘illegal, void of rule, inoperative and ineffective’. Tariq scorned the order. “The jurisdiction of the court does not apply to public sector undertakings,” he declared. To drive the point home, he suspended his head assistant because he had received a copy of the court order!

In sum, he was a moody, tyrannical, and reticent man, but much loved by his father. The Sheikh turned a blind eye to his son’s ability to ruin a prized organization.

The main reason Tariq could get away with his methods was that Sheikh Abdullah went to great lengths to create a committed bureaucracy and ‘beneficiary’ party cadre. He had made strenuous efforts to build a pliable bureaucracy to consolidate power. Unquestioned loyalty and personal commitment to the Sheikh were the main criteria for plum posting and transfers.

He, therefore, adopted the policy to cut down the cadres from the IAS. Kashmir Administrative Service (KAS) personnel were inducted into key jobs by aligning the terms of services of KAS officials with those of the IAS.

A number of IAS posts were converted into lower cadre posts so that they could be manned by KAS personnel. As many as 25 top positions of secretaries and commissioners, which could only be headed by IAS officers, were handed over to KAS officials to ensure personal loyalty to the political leadership.

“There is no way the NC will promote corruption or favouritism,” Farooq said with a straight face when confronted by the Press. He glossed over the fact that the Additional Chief Secretary of the State was a close relative of the Abdullahs. He had risen to the position over the heads of several of his senior colleagues.

Chapter

5

Sheikh Abdullah's health declined in the months after the heart attack in June, 1982. Cardiovascular issues combined with diabetes took a heavy toll on his body.

The condition worsened on the afternoon of September 5. Dr M.L. Bhatia, a heart specialist from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, tried to prop him up. Indira Gandhi flew in for a brief visit on September 6. Sheikh Abdullah was woken up from sleep for a 15 minute meeting with her.

"I request you," he pleaded, "to please place your hand on my son's head and take care of him as a guardian." Farooq bowed his head before Mrs Gandhi. She placed her hand on it in benediction.

The gesture relieved the Sheikh a bit. He was able to eat a lightly boiled egg the next day; and, on September 8, he ate some porridge. There was now some hope of recovery, even if it was for a short duration.

The news of the Sheikh's precarious condition spread like wild fire in the Valley. Thousands of people travelled long distances to gather at their leader's home. They were anxious about his well-being; mass prayers were organized for his return to health. Love for the Lion overflowed in the streets of Srinagar.

In Abdullah mansion's backrooms, contingency plans were drawn up. The Constitutional provision was that if the sitting Chief Minister died, the

senior-most minister would be sworn in as the Acting Chief Minister immediately. Even at the national level, Gulzari Lal Nanda took over after Nehru's death in 1964 as interim PM and held office till the Congress Legislature Party elected Lal Bahadur Shastri as the next Prime Minister.

In J&K, Finance Minister D.D. Thakur was the senior-most minister in Sheikh Abdullah's Cabinet. He was the automatic nominee for the interim arrangement. But Thakur was a Hindu in a Muslim majority state. Moreover, a stand-in CM, even for a few days, was problematic for Farooq. It could open up the succession battle with G.M. Shah once again. An ingenious plan was needed to circumvent the situation.

The Sheikh was struck by another heart attack a little before six in the evening of September 8. The news that Sheikh was slipping into his final moments reached Farooq while he was at the Dastgir shrine in the city. He left the shrine in the middle of the special prayer. The abrupt departure sparked rumours that the Sheikh was dead. People raced to the Sheikh's home; emotions reached a crescendo.

Sheikh Abdullah died at 7.30 p.m. on September 8, 1982.

Farooq drove to Thakur's residence from the shrine. Thakur had a Cabinet resolution ready. It informed the Governor about the Sheikh's death and nominated Dr Farooq Abdullah as the next Chief Minister. It was signed by the entire Council of Ministers.

Farooq took the letter and rushed to the Raj Bhawan. Governor B.K. Nehru was waiting for him. He swore in Farooq Abdullah as Chief Minister at 9.15 p.m.—barely 90 minutes after the Sheikh's last breath. Farooq's supporters profusely garlanded their new leader after the ceremony.

Farooq returned home after the swearing in. A family member pointed out to him that it was inappropriate to enter a house where a death had taken place with garlands around his neck. Farooq hastily removed the flowers and set about the task of breaking the news to the people of Sher-e-Kashmir. The formal announcement of the end of the Sheikh era was made at midnight.

Farooq's first action as a CM was to record a message that was broadcasted the next morning. He announced that he had dropped all ministers from the Cabinet. It was a neat move. The old ministry did not have to take an oath again to function as per the constitutional requirements. It also gave him a free hand to 'start with a clean slate'.

Sheikh Abdullah's last journey began early morning on September 10. The coffin was draped in the national tricolour and the red National Conference banner. Thousands of people accompanied the procession and gave vent to their emotions.

The Sheikh's cortège was led by a 130 mm field gun. It inched its way from the sprawling Polo Grounds, next door to his home, to Naseem Bagh, adjacent to Hazratbal shrine, 13 kilometres away. The Sheikh had chosen his resting place near a majestic Chinar tree in the Bagh in 1978. A few weeks before his death, a chinar sapling was planted almost next to the grave site. It was a fitting resting place for the Sheikh. It lay in the shadow of Hazratbal whose marble dome and tall minarets were constructed under his supervision. Much of his politics was also built from the podium of the dargah.

The morning chill hung heavy in the air when the gun-carriage with the Sheikh's body in a plain wooden casket heaped with flowers started on its mournful journey. The funeral procession was almost six kilometres long and every inch of space on the stretch was occupied by the mourning populace. Political heir Farooq stood alone near his father's feet in the carriage. It was followed by bus-loads of dignitaries, family, army brass, men of the Sikh Light Infantry with arms reversed, and the pipes and drums of the Ladakh Scouts and Naga Regiment playing the Slow Death March.

President of India Giani Zail Singh and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi were present at the funeral procession.

Public grief, as the cortège passed, burst out like an uncontrollable wave. The salutation, *sanye shero*—our lion—was on everyone's lips. People wept, chanted dirges, raised mournful slogans, beat their chests in rhythmic frenzy and flung flowers as the body of their baba—father—wove through the narrow streets of the old city. The Sheikh had wished that his funeral

procession should travel past all of Srinagar's main Muslim, Hindu and Sikh shrines.

People fainted, several were injured in the crush, at least one person died accidentally on a day when possibly 10 lakh people came on the streets with remarkable dignity and discipline.

“He showed us the way to educate ourselves and our children. Till then the only education we knew was religious. Unonain humko insaan banaya. Hum jaanwar jaise the (He made us into human beings. We were animals till then),” an India Today report quoted Srinagar residents on the Sheikh's contribution to ordinary lives. “Hamara qaum ooncha kiya (He gave our community dignity),” they said.*

The funeral procession took ten-and-a-half hours to reach Naseem Bagh. A squad of the Jat Regiment gave him an honour guard and a combined band of the Jat and Assam Rifles played a dirge for the last steps to the grave.

A gun salute and the sounding of the Last Post signalled the lowering of sanye shero's mortal remains into the concrete and brick chamber, 10 feet long and 4 feet wide and 4.5 feet deep.

The Sheikh was buried with his head to the north, face turned towards Mecca.

The final journey of Sheikh Abdullah lived up to the image of a messiah—the charismatic deliverer of his people. Ever since he entered public life, the Sheikh was Kashmir and Kashmir was Sheikh. People of the Valley thought of him both as a rebel, who dared mighty India again and again, and also as a family patriarch.

They understood when he walked the tight rope, holding out the special status of J&K vis a vis Pakistan's claim to wrangle political deals out of New Delhi; or when he purred and not growled at the Centre for the sake of his position in power. They forgave him because they loved him more than they disliked his acts of omission and commission.

The Sheikh was indeed charismatic in his uniquely flawed way. With his death, one era passed into history, and another was born for Kashmir.

Farooq Abdullah's appointment as Chief Minister was unanimously endorsed by the National Conference Legislature Party. He was escorted to the meeting by G.M. Shah. The transition was as smooth as it could have been. Farooq surveyed his first political triumph with satisfaction.

*Dubey, Suman. "Farooq Abdullah sworn in as J&K CM after the death of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah." India Today, 1982. Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19820930-farooq-abdullah-sworn-in-as-j-k-cm-after-the-death-of-sheikh-mohammad-abdullah-772242-2013-09-21>

Chapter

6

Indira Gandhi was keen on investing in Farooq Abdullah. He came across to her as a happy-go-lucky man who was neither ambitious nor deeply rooted in Kashmir politics and ethos. His only qualification was that he was the son of a father whose political goodwill was spread out across Kashmir.

Farooq had grown up in the comfortable shadow of his father—there hadn't been an occasion where he needed to fight a political battle in the streets, or hold his nerve during tense closed-door conversation. He was a greenhorn who could be groomed and moulded. He was the perfect proxy.

The Sheikh, on the other hand, had been his own man. The trait had irked Indira Gandhi at several junctures. He also commanded a personal public following that was reinforced by the politico-religious guardianship he had acquired of the holy Hazratbal shrine. He was, thus, both a Muslim leader and a nationalist; a Pakistan-baiter as well as an India-hater. He went from one to the other according to the political need of a particular day. The Sheikh's shape-changing tactics had upset her plans repeatedly. She, nevertheless, persisted with him; more so because she had no other choice.

Sheikh Abdullah was keen for Farooq to learn the political ropes quickly. He got him to the party, but son-in-law G.M. Shah ensured he didn't forge a political identity. Shah's politics reduced him into a rubber stamp president. Farooq had no role in the State administration too because the Sheikh liked to run the government singlehandedly. He, therefore, devoted his time to forge personal equations with the ruling elite in New Delhi, and its appointees in Srinagar.

Governor B.K. Nehru was particularly impressed with Farooq's manner and style. The young politician often dropped in at the Raj Bhawan for a drink and sought Nehru's advice on different issues. Farooq, Nehru was convinced, displayed the right eagerness to learn in order to fit into the role expected of him. He, therefore, mentored him with keen interest. The Congress felt smug in its choice.

The State Congress unit headed by Mufti Mohammad Sayeed was not too happy with the party's gamble. Mufti had cut his political teeth in the rough and tumble of Kashmir politics dominated by the Sheikh. The seemingly genteel Mufti with a crop of salt and pepper hair plastered across his broad head, who looked diminutive in the presence of 6 feet 4 inches tall Sheikh Abdullah, was born in Bijbehara on January 12, 1936, in a family of religious clerics. He studied at Srinagar's Sri Pratap College and later went to Aligarh Muslim University to earn a law degree and a post-graduate degree in Arabic. He returned to start a law practice in Anantnag.

Syed Mir Qasim, a Democratic National Conference (DNC) leader, was active in the area. Mufti soon joined Qasim's party, which was led by G. M. Sadiq. DNC, in fact, was formed after the Congress engineered a split in the NC and jailed Sheikh Abdullah in 1953. It was a Congress proxy, and a few years later when they merged, the Congress established its first real presence in Kashmir. Sheikh countered it by organizing a social boycott of anyone associated with the Congress. He called Congressmen 'gutter worms'.

Sadiq became Prime Minister of the Riyasat of Jammu and Kashmir in 1964. He was a believer in J&K's integration with India, who abolished the post of 'Prime Minister' and 'Sadre-e-Riyasat' in the State via a Constitutional amendment, and replaced the titles with Chief Minister and Governor, respectively. Mir Qasim and Mufti were a part of his Cabinet.

In the 1967 Assembly elections, Mufti won from Bijbehara unopposed on a Congress ticket and was appointed as the deputy minister in Sadiq's government. He soon resigned to side with Mir Qasim when he led a revolt against Sadiq for being soft on 'anti-national elements (Sheikh Abdullah and his supporters.)' In the new Congress government of 1972 led by Qasim, Mufti was made a Cabinet Minister.

When Sheikh Abdullah returned to power following the Indira-Sheikh Accord, the Congress picked ‘aggressive’ Mufti, committed to integration with India, as State Congress chief to counter the Sher-e-Kashmir. Though Mufti stood steadfast with the Congress, he couldn’t lead the party to win even a single election in Kashmir. A popular slogan, coined at the time to rub salt into his wounds, was ‘Muftian kabar Kasheer-e-Nebar (Mufti’s grave will be outside Kashmir)’.

The first turning point in Mufti’s career came in 1977 when the Congress withdrew support to Sheikh Abdullah. Mufti was just 41 and the Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) chief. He had a serious chance of becoming the CM. But Delhi politics spoilt it for him. The Assembly was dissolved on Sheikh Abdullah’s recommendation, much to the Mufti’s exasperation.

The run-up to the Sheikh’s succession was equally frustrating for Mufti. He strongly favoured that the Congress seized the initiative to create a situation in which the party was the only alternative for the people. His plans were contested by his one-time mentor Mir Qasim. He favoured accommodation with the NC.

Post-Farooq Abdullah’s installation as Chief Minister, the Congress was buffeted with internal dissensions. A meeting of the Pradesh Congress Committee, held in December 1982, degenerated into a name-calling session. PCC secretary Shah Shaida accused Mufti of building his own faction in the party through a number of defectors to the Congress and ‘tightening’ his grip on the organization by giving key posts to them. Such defections included Mian Bashir, a Gujjar MLA who was a deputy minister in the Sheikh’s government; Malik Mohiuddin, MLA and former Speaker of the Assembly; G.M. Bawan of Janata Party; and Moulvi Iftikhar, a Shia leader also from the Janata Party.

Rafiq Sadiq, son of the former Chief Minister G.M. Sadiq, was incensed over such inductions. He lashed out at Mufti for imposing ‘Aya Rams and Gaya Rams’ (turncoats) on the party and resigned his party position in protest. Party stalwart Syed Mir Qasim did not attend the meeting. Mufti, he said, never talked and acted seriously. “I don’t bother to go to such functions,” he commented. Begum Zainab, a widely respected leader, complained that she had not been even informed about the meeting. The

internal wrangling led to the emergence of four factions within the Congress—pro-Sadiq, pro-Qasim, pro-Mufti and pro-Ghulam Rasool Kar, the senior vice president.

Mufti, however, was not too worried about the developments in PCC. He had other things on his mind. Assembly elections were due in first half of 1983, parleys had begun between the Congress High Command and Farooq Abdullah about a possible electoral alliance. The Congress, with just 11 seats in a 76-member House, looked for a face-saver in the forthcoming elections. Congress National General Secretary Rajiv Gandhi did not think Mufti could deliver as ‘the party had no grass roots in Kashmir’. Farooq Abdullah, on his part, indicated that he was not averse to a tie-up, but said that he was very averse to the presence of Mufti in the Congress state hierarchy.

Vijay Dhar, a close aide of Rajiv Gandhi, was drafted in to hammer out a solution with Farooq. Dhar made four trips to Srinagar after Sheikh Abdullah’s death to explore various options. Rumours were also afoot that the Congress would merge with NC or vice versa. Mufti did not like the goings-on. “Elections or no elections, we are not here to play second fiddle to anybody. Can there be anything more stupid (than merging with NC)?” he retorted furiously to questions from journalists. “In my view, regional parties are creating more problems for the country than they are solving,” he said, and added that Mir Qasim’s plan of aligning with NC was his ‘personal whim’. The party cannot be dictated to by it.

As the Congress squabbles played themselves out, Farooq Abdullah turned Kashmir politics on its head in his own inimitable style. He told the Governor that the oath ceremony of his 10-member Cabinet would not be held at the Raj Bhawan as per convention. It would instead take place at the grave of his father. It would be a solemn, emotion-laced ceremony. Some, like Mohammad Akbar, an 80-year-old childhood friend of the Sheikh, thought it was a master stroke by Farooq at the beginning of his innings. “This man is to be watched,” Akbar commented, “he might even surpass his father in many ways.”

Corruption was a major issue in Kashmir. Farooq addressed it in his own dramatic way at the swearing in ceremony. “I’ll drown the new ministers

into the Dal Lake if they're found indulging in corrupt practices," he announced from the shores of the picturesque lake. "This evil has been eating into our vitals. I'll see to it that I give to my people an honest government and a clean administration. Even in my party, the corrupt people will not get the mandate. I'm going to form special courts to prosecute people from now onwards," he declared. He paused and added a caveat, "I can't go on digging into the past. Let me be totally responsible for what I am supposed to accomplish."

Farooq presented himself as a fresh-faced, sprightly leader. His physical energy was in sharp contrast to that of other politicians in the Valley. In the initial days of his new duties, Farooq often drove the car to the secretariat himself and ran up the three flights of stairs to his office. He was informal; he had no patience with protocol and officious ways. He arrived early at his meetings and asked direct, relevant questions. He was also wary of the bureaucrats because they had raised 'an iron wall around his father' and isolated him from the 'people during the last two or three years' of his life.

The style apart, Farooq also announced his intention to ban 'communal and secessionist' parties like the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), the Mahazi Azadi, the J&K Liberation Front and the Muslim League in the State. The provocation for the declaration was that the RSS was holding 'shakhas with swords and guns in free use' ever since he became the CM. There was no law in the State under which any organization that was communal by its policies and actions could be banned. The purview of the Public Safety Act, passed during the Sheikh's regime, extended only to the detention of undesirable elements. Farooq proposed to promulgate an ordinance to ensure legal provision for the ban.

The RSS was active in Jammu and nearby areas. Its main demand was the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution that granted special status to Jammu and Kashmir. Muslim organizations, on the other hand, challenged the validity and legality of Kashmir's accession to India. Interestingly, Farooq Abdullah did not name the Jamaat-e-Islami, which had an extensive network in the Valley and symbolized Muslim fundamentalism, or the BJP when he spoke about the proposed ban.

“A mouse is challenging an elephant,” BJP Vice President Ram Jethmalani scoffed at Farooq. Prominent RSS leader, Hansraj Gupta, remarked that the Chief Minister had deliberately bracketed the RSS, a cultural entity, with Muslim communal organizations because of political exigencies in the Valley. Farooq, he said, was an ‘immature politician playing in the hands of some who wanted his quick downfall’. Muslim League Leader Azam Inqilabi dismissed Farooq’s statement with contempt. “The freedom fighters of Kashmir will continue their struggle,” he said.*

The electoral performance of the Jan Sangh and its successor, the BJP, was far from impressive in Jammu. In no election, where they contested alone, they secured more than 6 seats out of the region’s 33 seats. Similarly in Kashmir, the Jamaat was represented in the Assembly by only one member.

More interestingly, the NC and BJP shared power in Jammu municipal committee as alliance partners. It buttressed claims of the critics that Farooq was playing politics of convenience with the BJP and secessionist groups like the People’s Liberation Front, the Jamait-e-Tulba, and the People’s Conference.

The nimble political footwork that Farooq displayed during the initial months as CM clearly indicated that he was not as naive as was believed so far. He understood his constraints, addressed his compulsions, and used his charms and silver tongue to win the day for himself. He addressed his constituency directly, and, while doing so, played both the sides. His guile was charming.

*Bose, Sumantra, Kashmir at the Crossroads: Inside a 21st Century Conflict (India: Picador, 2021)

Chapter

7

In the spring of 1983, a couple of months before the Assembly elections, Swami Dharendra Brahmachari, the much-celebrated yoga guru and a close confidant of Indira Gandhi, flew his Cessna Skymaster to Jammu to pick up Farooq Abdullah for a visit to his ultra-deluxe Aparna Ashram in Mantalai, some 120 kilometres from the city.

Brahmachari knew Sheikh Abdullah ‘intimately’ long before he had taken over as the Chief Minister in 1975. He also met him ‘occasionally’ during his eight years in office. Brahmachari was introduced to Farooq by his father during one of his visits to the Sheikh’s home. The tall, ivory skinned yoga master with long, flowing hair and beard, whose muscled-to-the-bone body was always draped in a single white piece of fine muslin, found the Sher-e-Kashmir’s son to be an ‘impetuous and impulsive’ young man. He was ‘nothing more than a playboy, always on the hunt for baser pleasures of life’.

Brahmachari though was interested in Kashmir and its political class. During the Congress rule, he founded a lavish centre, Aparna Ashram, for imparting yoga education in the picturesque hills of Mantalai near Jammu. Spread over 658 canals of land, Aparna Ashram was both a luxurious resort for the Swami as well as a yoga centre. It boasted of an air strip with a control tower for the exclusive use of the two aircraft that he owned. Dharendra Brahmachari was a keen flyer; he piloted the aircraft himself.

Brahmachari’s proximity to Indira Gandhi ensured the Ashram prospered and the Swami could pretty much do what he wanted. He had set up a gun

factory, Shiva Gun Factory, in Jammu, and often jetted between the Ashram and the city. He was, in fact, the first truly high profile, charismatic, powerful and rich yoga guru in India.

He cultivated Sheikh Abdullah when he came to power. The Sheikh had his own uses for him in his politics with the Centre. The two got along well and the Sheikh passed on the useful introduction to his son. Farooq had heard about the Ashram, and one day, when Brahmachari was in Delhi, he visited it.

Soon after Farooq became Chief Minister, he expressed his keenness to visit the ashram 'on many occasions, when Brahmachari called on him or met elsewhere'. Farooq said he wanted to be at Mantalai complex when the yoga classes were being held. He repeated his 'request dozens of times', but the Swami, 'being always apprehensive of his impetuous, impulsive and unpredictable behaviour', avoided him. Farooq was irritated and 'expressed his annoyance' at Brahmachari's 'wilful avoidance to invite him to see the training camp'.*

Brahmachari was on the horns of a dilemma. He didn't want to invite the Chief Minister, and he couldn't avoid him too. Considering that any further disregard for his wishes would 'land him in trouble', he agreed to take Farooq to Mantalai complex in the spring of 1983.

Brahmachari flew the Cessna Skymaster to Jammu. Farooq and his security men were to fly with him, but while boarding the plane, Brahmachari noticed a 'beautiful girl and another gentleman trying to get into the plane at the airport'.

He promptly objected to their presence, but Farooq asked him to let the girl and the man accompanying her board the aircraft. Brahmachari, 'much to his chagrin and embarrassment' kept quiet, and flew to the ashram complex.

After dinner, Farooq 'openly told' Brahmachari that he had not come to Mantalai 'to take his dinner but to enjoy a gala evening'. The yoga guru quietly retired for the day after giving 'instructions to his tutors to be careful'.

Early next morning, the tutors told him that ‘(Farooq) had forced everyone to keep awake till 4 a.m. in the morning and dance with him under coercion, compulsion and undue influence. He kept on dancing the whole night and retired only at dawn. The girls and boys undergoing training, who hailed from highly respectable families of the country, were disgusted so much that none of them looked at him when he proceeded to the runway for the take-off.’

While leaving the place, Farooq ‘light heartedly’ expressed the ‘working of his mind’ when he said, “Swami ji, you have made a heaven on earth. If you give me this place, I will spend every evening in this heaven and relieve myself of the inflictions of political life which I have to undergo from morning till evening.”* The words put Brahmachari into thought. He could ‘see a spark surging out of a morbid mind’. He could gauge ‘the consequences which could follow if the head of government of an important state of country would run amuck’. He had all the regrets of having agreed to invite him but it was too late to repent.

Brahmachari was given a full account of what had transpired the previous night when he returned to the Ashram after dropping Farooq Abdullah in Jammu. He felt ‘ashamed’. Farooq had been ‘photographed while dancing by some of the trainee boys. His security guard snatched the film and instead the film of his own camera was given to them. His camera had taken photographs only while he was sitting and witnessing the dance.’

Brahmachari did not take up the issue with Farooq. He withdrew instead. But whenever he bumped into Farooq, he insisted on visiting the Mantalai complex again. Brahmachari avoided extending another invitation. His reluctance left no doubt in Farooq’s mind that the Swami had no intention to oblige him. It caused ‘greatest annoyance’ to Farooq because he could ‘never imagine’ he could be ‘so lightly treated’ by Brahmachari.

The cold war between the two notwithstanding, Farooq managed to wrangle the usage of Swami’s aircraft—Donier and Cessna Skymaster—for his personal trips to Srinagar, Delhi, Katra, Amritsar, etc. In fact, he ‘commandeered Swami’s Cessna when he visited Amritsar to meet Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale to seek his support in the upcoming Assembly elections in J&K’.

Though Brahmachari was not actively involved in politics, ‘yet he has been a great supporter and sympathizer’ of the Congress primarily because of his association with the Nehru family. When Mrs Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi publicly denounced Farooq for acting against national interest by harbouring Pakistani elements in the Kashmir Valley, he stood with the Gandhis, and avoided Farooq.

Swami Dharendra Brahmachari narrated his ‘harassment’ by Farooq Abdullah to Indira Gandhi in all its detail almost on a daily basis. She noted the young man’s dare. It was obvious to her that Farooq, by needling Brahmachari, was indirectly throwing a challenge at her. He was boldly testing the waters before unfolding his game plan for the June elections.

Farooq indeed left no opportunity to take on the Congress leaders. “If the Congress doesn’t behave itself, there will be bloodshed in Kashmir,” he told The Week magazine during the run up to the poll. He went on to warn, in another interview, that if the electorate did not renew the NC’s mandate, the people would have to face a spell of Congress misrule and the State ‘might have to face an Assam-like situation which nobody will be able to control’.

The reference was to the communal violence in Assam, in which the Muslims were a few months earlier.

The Congress hit back with Rajiv Gandhi. He charged Farooq with siding with anti-national forces, especially the Pakistani elements in the Valley. Arif Mohammad Khan then remarked that though they were not against Farooq Abdullah personally, they were against his policy of patronage to secessionist and anti-social elements. Moulvi Iftikhar Hussain Ansari thereafter labelled him as ‘an irresponsible politician’.

The rhetoric was indeed full-throated and fancy; and from the day elections were announced, real issues like clean administration, development, and law and order paled into the background. There were charges galore, and a bigger heap of counter charges from both the sides.

On April 14, 1983, Indira Gandhi visited Jammu. Perhaps irked by Farooq’s continued hostility towards Brahmachari and his bid to embarrass her through him, she launched a broadside against the Chief Minister who was

present on the dais with her. She categorically accused Farooq of joining hands with communal forces in the Valley, and in an indirect reference to the NC-BJP alliance in the Jammu civic election, said that ‘things became too hard to comprehend when certain forces who publicly denounced communalism sought electoral understanding with them’.

Rhetoric apart, moves were simultaneously underway to thrash out an understanding between the two main parties in J&K. Veteran Mir Qasim favoured a deal with NC, but he was vehemently opposed by Mufti. The latter was Farooq’s *bête noire* “I cannot possibly agree to come to terms with a Congress unit whose President spends his time abusing my family and trying to create misunderstanding between me and the Prime Minister. I wanted to avoid a confrontation but what do I do when the Indira Congress rabble-rousers in the State are hell-bent on creating problems?” he complained bitterly.

Indira Gandhi was not too keen to keep the Sheikh’s son in good humour. She wished to see the back of the Abdullah family scion whom she had favoured as a successor when the Sheikh was in two minds. She encouraged the anti-alliance voices as a part of her overall strategy to curb Farooq. It put the CM under pressure; Farooq turned to Rajiv Gandhi.

Farooq had built on his past association with Rajiv Gandhi and established a personal political rapport with him. He climbed down from his original stand and expressed his willingness to enter into an alliance with the Congress ‘in the interest of secular forces’. The leaders probed their options for peace privately while the tempo of antagonism between their parties was kept up in the public space.

Rajiv Gandhi was largely convinced about the utility of having Farooq Abdullah on the Congress’ side in national interest, and above the narrow confines of his party’s political interests. Indira Gandhi, however, was wary of him. “He’s an unreliable boy . . . tells too many lies,” she told Rajiv bluntly, though she did not veto his plan.

As discussions between Farooq and Rajiv neared a possible conclusion, hawks in both the parties mounted extreme pressure. Followers of Farooq’s brother-in-law, G.M. Shah, wanted the NC to stay clear of the Congress. “It

will gobble up NC,” Shah warned. On the other hand, the lone senior voice of Mir Qasim was heard by the Congress High Command when he was called for consultations in Delhi. “My stand is abundantly clear. I have always been in favour of seat adjustments between these two secular forces . . . The fight between the two will lead to destabilization of a secular government.”

Mir Qasim’s view failed to prevail at a meeting of the PCC held in Srinagar in April. Mufti Mohammad Sayeed set the tone for the discussions when he painted a rosy picture of the Congress’ poll prospects. “We cannot commit suicide by surrendering the party’s interests to the NC after working hard for a decade and posing a serious threat to Farooq Abdullah,” he said before a cheering crowd of party workers. Qasim was denounced for his anti-party stand.

A couple of days later, Farooq met Rajiv again over dinner in a last-minute bid to arrive at an electoral understanding. The talks failed, and both parties announced they would go alone. The battle was on.

*Writ petition No.667 of 1988 filed before the Jammu and Kashmir High Court at Jammu

*Ibid

Chapter

8

The freeze in Srinagar was the worst ever in a hundred years. It started early—almost mid-autumn in 1982—and worsened as the year came to a close. Water pipes burst, traffic was paralyzed, and heavy snow cloistered people indoors with their kangris burning day and night. It seemed as if the heart of the Kashmir Valley had turned into fiery ice—it burnt the skin with its touch; ripped off flesh on exposure.

The 1983 Assembly elections were around the corner in Jammu and Kashmir. They were scheduled in June. It was May already and the weather was still cold. Most hill tops in the Valley were crested with heavy patches of snow, and where they had melted, they had left thick puddles of slush.

Dr Farooq Abdullah was undeterred by the challenge thrown by the weather Gods. He instead readied himself for the challenge in the political field. The 1983 elections were his first, but he was sure of himself. He knew his strong points. He was young and charismatic—Kashmir's Mr Clean—who held out hope of a new deal. The people would certainly vote for him. And, if there were some stragglers, memories of the presiding patriarch of Kashmir public life, Sheikh Abdullah, would pull them in.

Farooq left nothing to chance. He started his election campaign early. He drove to every nook and corner of the Valley in his shiny blue Matador. When large crowds of men, women and children gathered around Farooq's mini bus, he climbed to its roof, balanced himself with a heavy trekker's stick, and delivered an impassioned speech. He ended each of his orations by repeatedly raising the slogan: 'Vote trawzi . . . alibaani (Vote for the

plough, the party's election symbol.)' The crowds responded with resounding cheers.

The previous elections in J&K were held in 1977 with the Sheikh at the helm of affairs. He was aided by party veterans like Mirza Afzal Beg and G.M. Shah. National Conference had won 47 of the 76 seats in the State Assembly—39 of the 42 seats in Kashmir, and 7 of the 32 in Jammu, beside the 2 in Ladakh. Since then, odds had piled up against the NC.

For one, the BJP had made its presence felt in Jammu. In Ladakh, there was disquiet against the NC. In the Kashmir Valley, the Congress, though split between Mufti Mohammad Sayeed and Mir Qasim camps, had readied itself for a battle royale. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi took a personal interest in the goings-on. She spent six days touring the State. She drew large, enthusiastic crowds in NC's bastion—the Valley. The young Chief Minister was walking on thin ice—if he lost more than 8 seats from the previous tally, he would lose power, perhaps, forever.

In other words, Farooq had to not only retain his grip on the Valley, but also ensure victory of a few candidates from other regions. It was a huge task which called for deployment of shrewd political skills, plenty of grit and a large slice of luck. Farooq's back was against the wall. He had to rely largely on the sentiments of the people for his father and his own charisma to fend off a concerted attack by the Congress.

Farooq wasn't overwhelmed by the challenge. He flew to Amritsar to meet Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who had firmly occupied the centre stage of Sikh politics in the country. That Bhindranwale was leading terrorism in Punjab was another matter. He met him at the Golden Temple and asked for support. Farooq also met Akali Dal Chief Parkash Singh Badal. He agreed to send influential party men to Srinagar and Jammu to canvass for support for the NC among the Sikh community of the region.

In Srinagar, Farooq moved swiftly to patch up with the Mirwaiz Moulvi Farooq. The Abdullahs and Mirwaiz were on the opposite sides for more than 44 years. While Sheikh Abdullah's influence emanated from Hazratbal shrine, the Mirwaiz dominated the show at Jumma Masjid in Srinagar. It

was 'sher-bakra' rivalry. The Sheikh and his supporters were the lions, Mirwaiz followers were the goats.

Farooq Abdullah reached out to Moulvi Farooq and persuaded him to bury the hatchet. They addressed a joint rally in Srinagar's Iqbal Park to announce that 'Double Farooq' would be their leaders henceforth. "If you have a problem, you go to Moulvi Farooq first," he told the people, "He will solve it for you. No need to come to me." The pact effectively sewed up all Assembly seats in Srinagar and adjoining areas for the NC.

The Congress wasn't overawed by Farooq's relentless campaign efforts. Indira Gandhi's visit and the presence of major Congress leaders in the Valley were aimed at ensuring that the NC lost at any cost. It deployed all its big guns. K.C. Pant was handed the overall charge of party's electioneering in the State. He jetted between Delhi, Jammu and Srinagar, assessed needs, and provided necessary support to candidates.

Mohammed Arif Khan was in charge of the Valley as well as the Ladakh region. Ensconced in his suite at Broadway Hotel with an array of telephones fitted with scramblers, he was tasked with ensuring that the election machinery in 44 constituencies remained well-oiled during the run up to the polls. Khan remained away from public meetings, but regulated the distribution of funds and personnel.

He also coordinated with Union Minister Mohsina Kidwai, and Begum Abida Ahmed, widow of the late Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, President of India. The two campaigned door-to-door for women's votes.

In Jammu, Deputy Union Minister Ashok Gehlot and Uttar Pradesh Health Minister Lokpati Tripathi worked their scrambler phones to reach financial and material support to sub regional leaders.

Alongside, Ghulam Nabi Azad and Rajesh Pilot were drafted to campaign in far-flung areas of Jammu region. Pilot, a Gujar himself from UP, was asked to woo herdsmen and the shepherd community in Poonch-Rajouri area. Azad was sent to Muslim-dominated district of Doda.

In the middle of this carefully planned strategy was the central role of Congress State Chief Mufti Mohammad Sayeed. The Congress placed Mufti as its chief vote puller after Indira Gandhi. Advertisements in Srinagar newspapers carried the photograph of Mufti only. It was a drastic departure from the Congress practice of highlighting Indira Gandhi in its pre-poll media blitz.

Mufti was also the sole local leader who accompanied the PM in her campaign helicopter. And, to add to the Kashmiri touch, in rally after rally Indira Gandhi reiterated that the Congress in Kashmir was ‘an organization of the local people and not of outsiders’. She stressed that the special status of J&K under Article 370 would continue, more Central funds would be allocated, and the State would be insulated against aggressive businesses from other parts of the country.

On the other side of the snow-laden Banihal, the Congress was on firm footing. In the 1977 elections, the NC had won 7 seats from Jammu because of division of votes between the Congress and the Janata Party. The latter was virtually out of the fray in 1983. It had been replaced by the Hindu-centric BJP to some extent.

Congress’ campaign strategy had its flip side too. Its profession of Kashmiri identity provoked a backlash in Jammu. The BJP was quick to cash in on it. BJP’s election manifesto unambiguously demanded the repeal of Article 370 and the withdrawal of the Resettlement Act, which the State Assembly had passed some months ago. It had been sent back to the House for reconsideration by the Governor.

Atal Behari Vajpayee, BJP’s tallest national leader, was a mild-mannered man with a reputation of delivering stirring speeches; though he seldom held his critics in aggressive combat, either in private or in public. His politics, it seemed, was like his gait—leisurely, but measured. He often paused to enjoy the view, or take in fresh air. Vajpayee’s pauses during his rhetorical declamations, in fact, held the political game in a state of suspended animation on innumerable occasions.

But on an election tour to the region, he commented caustically, “Under the Resettlement Act, even Asghar Khan, the former Pakistani Air Force chief

who had ordered the bombing of Jammu, can return to Kashmir and claim resettlement because he is a Kashmir State Subject. But thousands of Hindu refugees, who had crossed over into J&K from the other side of the border, are still denied human rights. This is not Resettlement Act, this is replacement act.”*

The mood in Jammu was largely one of anger and frustration with the NC leadership. Bhim Singh, president of the Panther Party and former MLA, campaigned on the discrimination plank. “Though Jammu has nearly a half of the State’s population, in 36 years the State did not have a single Chief Minister from Jammu, nor did it have a single Chief Secretary or a single Director-General of Police from the region. The Dogra rule over Kashmiris till 1947 might have been bad, but the Kashmiri rule over Dogras is no better,” he told his audience.

Jammu’s two tehsils, Bishnah and Ranbir Singh Pora, he pointed out, provided nearly half of the entire food grain production in the State. Yet, the Jammu men got a smaller ration of grains than their Kashmiri counterparts. Similarly, nearly half of Jammu formed the eastern part of a long dry-belt extending from Rawalpindi along the rain-shadow zone of the Shivaliks. But the charge of canal irrigation in the rain-fed Kashmir Valley was Rs 3 per acre compared to Rs 12 per acre in Jammu. Irrigation facilities from tube well projects were also four times dearer in Jammu than in Kashmir.

Of the 1,900 staff employed by the State government, he said, only 272 were from Jammu, and the distribution of development funds between Kashmir-Ladakh and Jammu were 65:35.

Jammu dwellers were also discriminated against in admission to engineering and medical colleges in the State. Three separate writs against the admission procedure in the State’s engineering and medical colleges were pending before the Supreme Court.

The BJP and Bhim Singh’s attacks notwithstanding, Farooq was determined to make inroads into the plains on the other side of the Pir Panjal range. He roped in his mother to canvass for support, more so in the border areas where the Gujjar community was predominant. Begum Abdullah was a Kashmiri Gujjar.

The intensity of the campaign from the main elections rival created friction in the streets of the State. Violence often erupted between NC and Congress workers and, by the time the elections ended, about 600 people sustained injuries in incidents across the State.

The most prominent and brazen case of poll-related violence was the burning down of the Pradesh Congress Committee office on Maulana Azad Road in Srinagar on May 19, 1983. It began when Mohammad Shafi Qureshi, Congress candidate for the Srinagar parliamentary constituency, insisted on holding a street corner meeting in an area prohibited by the Election Commission because of the presence of tourists. As Qureshi was arguing with the police men on duty, more than 400 of them, a group of NC activists of the Footpath Union (an organization of small shopkeepers who conduct business on pavements) threw stones at the PCC building.

State government employees came out of the nearby secretariat building on hearing the commotion and joined the rioters. Qureshi was manhandled in the ensuing melee, and the building was set on fire. In his First Information Report (FIR) lodged with the police, Qureshi named 43 miscreants, of whom 20 were government servants.

The incident created a furore in the State and in New Delhi. The Congress said that the arson was as an attempt by the ruling party to browbeat its rival through government-sponsored strong-arm tactics.

Farooq was campaigning in Anantnag district when the incident took place. He ordered a judicial inquiry, but followed it up by describing the Congress workers as 'crafty hoodlums' who set their own building on fire 'to destroy the records of election funds'. Other NC leaders claimed that Qureshi 'provoked the masses' by holding a meeting in an out-of-bounds area. It was the Congress, they said, who hired goondas to set the building on fire and create sympathy for the party 'which was losing the elections badly'. Charges and counter charges notwithstanding, it was clear that the situation was desperate for both the sides. It was now a no-holds barred contest.

Another, and far more critical, incident during the campaign completely soured the personal relationship between Indira Gandhi and Farooq Abdullah. She was in Srinagar to address the last election meeting at Iqbal

Park. Some men came behind the dais, made obscene remarks; and, when Mrs Gandhi turned towards them with annoyance, they flashed their private parts at her. “This is something that happened, a lot of people did not notice, but she saw it, she never mentioned it . . . ” B.K. Nehru said.*

“I have a feeling that this was reported to her as being the doing of Farooq Abdullah. And that seems to have embittered her to such an extent that she simply could not think of Farooq remaining in office. Farooq is a gentleman—he would never dream of doing this. It was only his enemies who could. Like that idiot . . . G M Shah . . . Farooq says G M Shah did it. But to Mrs Gandhi it was reported by Mr Sayeed and Fotedar, these petty people, looking after themselves, and she believed them. That is the only explanation I can offer for the bitterness that arose. The fact that Farooq joined the opposition had really nothing to do with her enmity. She did not like it—she would have preferred that he joined her. But that was not the real cause. The real cause was that she thought that he had organized this personal insult to her. And to womanhood, she was a very strong feminist. Any insult to women was an insult to her personally. It was there the complete lack of contact started. And she decided to depose Farooq at whatever cost.”†

Farooq did not take cognizance of the incident. He instead upped the ante through the last days of the campaign with a mixture of ire and bluster. “If the Centre does not provide enough financial support to the State, I will go directly to the Arab world to seek aid,” he said inaugurating a luxury hotel in Srinagar. The threat of seeking out the global Muslim community in case the Centre did not meet his demands was clear. The remarks were a classic case of bluster since no Indian state can directly seek funds from a foreign country. But it didn’t matter to Farooq—he had made his point and moved on.

Similarly, he dispatched several official notes to the Central government, juggling statistics from the State and Central records, to show how J&K had received unfair treatment from New Delhi. He quoted the letters in his public speeches to showcase the efficiency of his own government and the niggardly attitude of the Centre.

The Congress' choice of Mufti Mohammad as the face of its election campaign also irked him greatly. Mufti was a lifelong critic of Sheikh Abdullah. He refused to join the Sheikh's government even though his mentor, Mir Qasim, had crossed over in 1975.

“How can Mrs Gandhi expect friendliness and cooperation from me when such a man (Mufti) is leading her party here?” Farooq railed each time he was asked about State-Centre cooperation.

On the ground, the NC under Sheikh Abdullah, had taken steps to ensure the cadre stayed invested in the party. In his policy of single line administration, the district magistrates were re-designated as district development commissioners in charge of district development boards. These board controlled funds were meant for development activities and comprised MLAs, MLCs and the MP of the area, the sarpanches, and a few nominated members, invariably NC leaders.

The boards were assigned the task of distributing 46 per cent of the District Plan Outlay to various development activities. In 1983, the outlay of Rs 185 crores was controlled by quasi-political bodies with bureaucrats as mere figureheads and politicians making a killing for themselves.

Despite rampant corruption, the Valley presented a rosy picture because of tourism (5 lakhs arrivals annually), horticulture and handicraft industries. All three were instant cash industries. They created a level of affluence in Kashmir which was not seen anywhere else in the country. Though there was no major industry, education, health and transport infrastructure, there were just 50,000 people in the live registers of the State's employment exchange (as against a population of 60 lakhs) in 1983; 75% of them were in Jammu.*

The high-decibel contest between the NC and the Congress concluded with a clear divide along sub-regional line. Farooq Abdullah swept the Valley. He won 46 seats (just one short from the 1977 tally). The Congress ruled the coast in the Jammu region with 26 seats in its kitty. It had increased its strength in the Assembly by as many as 15 legislators. However, the BJP failed to open its account.

The election results gave Farooq the satisfaction of having ridden a full-frontal assault by the Congress on his own strength. He strategized, organized and galvanized the NC machinery almost single-handedly and campaigned tirelessly to thwart the appeal of Indira Gandhi and Mufti Mohammad Sayeed among the voters.

In several ways, Farooq Abdullah proved he possessed as much a political mind as his father, if not more. He stood up to the Congress' dare and beat it back at the most critical juncture of his life. It was a make-or-break situation, but he made it to the other side, riding the rough tides with powerful, definitive strokes. He was a winner all the way—the Lion's cub had come of age. He was ready to roar.

Sunday magazine summed up the election campaign and Farooq's victory in the headline of its cover story. 'Farooq defeats Indira Gandhi', it said. The headline underlined that her all-out effort to oust the CM had fallen flat. He was not just an heir to a political legacy in a state, he was rather a national political hero—the giant slayer, in a manner of speaking. None of the other 'national' non-Congress leaders had ever notched up such a huge victory against the 'invincible Mrs G' while Farooq had stamped his presence in style.

The victory, however, came with serious allegations of electoral malpractices. The Congress described it as a 'fraudulent victory'. It deployed the All India Congress Committee Working President Kamalapati Tripathi to make its claim. "Not only was systematic violence practised against Congress workers and sympathizers throughout the election campaign and even after the poll," he said, "but also there is unmistakable evidence of unfair practices in connection with the polling. The directives of the Election Commission have been grossly violated. Facts speak louder than the protestations."

He added that more than half a dozen election observers of the party collected evidence, which clearly indicated that the elections were rigged. Union Minister of State for Agriculture Arif Mohammed Khan and Union Deputy Minister for Law and Company Affairs Ghulam Nabi Azad were among those who presented the evidence to the party.

Powerful MP Arun Nehru, Jagdish Tytler and Rajesh Pilot, besides legal luminary Murli Bhandare, spent a week in Srinagar to probe the 'mysterious victory of the National Conference'. Nehru concluded, "I have yet to come across an election in which all the norms of free and fair elections were more grossly violated. Each and every constituency tells its own story about the unfair practices adopted by the ruling party."

Party functionaries claimed that 2,000 ballot papers of each assembly constituency were distributed to NC workers one day before the polling in the Valley. The ballots were marked in favour of the NC and put in the ballot boxes one hour before the polling began. In some constituencies, ballot papers were reported missing. Each booth was issued with the ballot papers in chronological order, but in Anantnag district, for example, large blocks of serial numbers were missing. The number of votes recovered in some ballot boxes was more than the number of votes that were actually polled.

Congress leaders claimed that they had submitted over a lakh ballot papers from the State to the Election Commission. Tytler purchased 300 ballot papers from Srinagar for Rs 600. "People in Kashmir are peddling them like apples and cherries," he quipped.

In another case, the Rajouri district police recovered over 3,000 ballot papers along with the boxes from the residence of Mohammed Akram, the returning officer of the constituency. Akram 'illegally' took the ballot papers stamped in favour of the Congress to his house soon after the declaration of the result on June 6, 1983. A criminal case was registered, but the State government initiated no action against him.

The returning officer of Indramal constituency wrote in his report that the 'ballot papers were found in the ballot box in batches. (As a result) the ballot papers in that box were not taken up for counting but were rejected under the circumstances'. These votes were, however, counted and the result was announced in favour of the NC.

The Congress also claimed that in 143 polling booths in six assembly constituencies of Srinagar, the number of votes recovered from the ballot boxes during the counting were far more than those that were actually

polled. For example, in Abi Korpora, 614 votes were counted against 453 polled votes.

The allegations caused an uproar in political circles. State opposition parties launched another attack on the new government. The BJP sided with the Congress. It said that the widespread rigging in the Valley was because the ruling party had selectively promoted State cadre of officials owing allegiance to the NC. The Congress said that there was enough material evidence to file 40 writ petitions in the High Court on electoral fraud committed by Farooq Abdullah and his party.

Farooq did not get into a slanging match with his rivals. The first address of the Governor B.K. Nehru to the State Assembly plainly said that the elections had been ‘free and fair’.

NC leadership had let it be known that the ‘poisonous propaganda’ of rigging against Farooq was a part of the Congress leaders like Pant, Arif, Azad and Mufti’s effort to explain the fiasco in the Valley. Indira Gandhi was livid over the poll outcome. “These people have made up untenable excuses to save their skins,” the party said.

The election victory pitchforked Farooq into national political space. The young CM became a magnet for anti-Congress sentiments across the country. Farooq is the new NTR of opposition unity, they said.

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*“1984: Why Indira Dismissed Farooq?” Kashmir Life. November 28, 2018. Available at: <https://kashmirlife.net/1984-why-indira-dismissed->

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†Widmalm, Sten, Kashmir In Comparative Perspective: Democracy And Violent Separatism In India (UK: Routledge Curzon, 2002)

*Bose, Sumantra, Kashmir at the Crossroads: Inside a 21st Century Conflict (India: Picador, 2021)

Chapter

9

Allegations of rigging against the National Conference were not new for the party; it took them in its stride. As early as 1951, elections to the membership of the Constituent Assembly of the ‘Riyasat of Jammu and Kashmir’ had provoked similar charges. Seventy-five persons were to be elected to the body through adult franchise and secret ballot. Forty-three representatives were to be elected from Kashmir, while Jammu was to send in 30 members. Two seats were allocated to Ladakh, and another 25 were earmarked for Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. The last were only symbolic of the participation in view of the prevailing ground situation.

Since Sheikh Abdullah occupied the commanding heights in Kashmir, all the nominees of National Conference from the Valley were elected unopposed. United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan reported that non-NC candidates from Ladakh ‘withdrew under pressure’ from the contest.

In Jammu, a sizeable section of non-Muslim population was not in favour of NC or the Sheikh. The south and south eastern district of Jammu were strongholds of the Praja Parishad. It opposed the Sheikh’s policy of ousting Hindu landlords from the Valley under the guise of land reforms. It announced it would contest 28 of the 30 seats.

Sheikh Abdullah came up with an ingenious solution to quell the threat from Praja Parishad. In a uniquely singular move, unheard of during those times, technical reasons were cited to reject the nomination papers of 13 Parishad nominees. In other words, they were disqualified from contesting

election for a body which was to transition the 'Riyasat' to a democratic form of governance. It was a cruel irony that fair and free elections, the basic promise of democracy, were undermined at the inception through unfair, undemocratic tactics.

The Parishad boycotted the Constituent Assembly polls in protest against 'rigging' and the NC's attempt to create a party-state rather than a democratic state. Parishad leaders said that the NC slogan of 'One Leader, One Party, One Programme' translated to Sheikh Abdullah, Sheikh Abdullah and more Sheikh Abdullah. There was no scope of anyone else, let alone opposition groups or alternate political ideas. The Sheikh wanted a monopoly control over the entire 'Riyasat'.

The Hindu-dominated Praja Parishad was not the only group in opposition to the Sheikh. A segment of Muslims in the Valley opposed his style of functioning, too. Ghulam Mohiuddin Karra was a close associate of the Sheikh. He was at the forefront of the Quit Kashmir movement of 1946 directed against the erstwhile Maharaja. He was also the NC chief of Srinagar district. He fell out with Sheikh Abdullah a year later and was expelled from the party.

Karra formed Jammu and Kashmir Political Conference as a counter point to the NC. He approached Jawaharlal Nehru for support. Nehru agreed that viable opposition was a vital need in a democratic polity, but said that India's Kashmir policy revolved around the Sheikh and 'nothing should be done to weaken him'. The response encouraged the Sheikh to tighten his control over the political situation in J&K and, as a token of tribute to Nehru, he offered to pass a resolution in the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly confirming the State's accession to India. Sheikh Abdullah knew Nehru would not accept such a resolution because it would cause embarrassment before the UN. He, nevertheless, made the offer to assuage any lingering doubts in Nehru's mind about his personal commitment to the Kashmir issue.

The Praja Parishad continued its protest in the streets of Jammu. It demanded 'full integration' of the State with India like other princely states. It said that the adoption of a separate flag for J&K under its own constitution with the title of 'Prime Minister' for Sheikh Abdullah was

incongruous with the prevailing political set up in India. The country should have just one flag, one constitution and one executive head—Ek Vidhan, Ek Nishan, Ek Pradhan. No state should have a different set up if ‘the legitimate democratic rights of the people of Jammu from the communist-dominated anti-Dogra government of Sheikh Abdullah’ were to be safeguarded.

The founder of the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, precursor to the present day Bharatiya Janata party, Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, was at the forefront of the agitation. It raged in Jammu through 1952 and early 1953. It was supported by Ladakh’s Tibetan Buddhists, too. The Sheikh responded with repressive police action. Mass arrests of activists were carried out through the State. Mukherjee was arrested on the Jammu-Srinagar border while trying to cross over to Kashmir. He was taken to Srinagar jail, but was later shifted to a cottage when he fell ill. Mukherjee died of a heart failure on June 23, 1953. His death ‘under mysterious circumstances’ raised a furore throughout the country. Jan Sang leaders alleged he fell victim to Abdullah-Nehru conspiracy.

However, the agitating Jammu and Ladakh regions not only represented social and political reaction, they also reflected the social and political plurality of J&K. It was ‘ultimately the new regime’s intolerance of that plural character, first of any opposition within the legislature and then of dissent on the streets, that drove the crisis’.*

Ironically, Sheikh Abdullah was similarly arrested by the government of Maharaja Hari Singh after he gave a call for the monarch to ‘Quit Kashmir’. Jawaharlal Nehru had then rushed to Jammu and was on his way to Srinagar to protest and defend the Sheikh when he was arrested and sent back to Delhi.

Meanwhile, India gained freedom and Nehru became the country’s first Prime Minister. The process of consolidating princely states in the Union of India was taking shape. The Sheikh was his choice for Kashmir. But he had to get out of the jail first.

The only way to do so was to arrive at a compromise with the Maharaja. The Sheikh wrote to Hari Singh on September 26, 1947, and assured him

his full support and loyalty. The letter read:

May it please Your Highness,

It is after about one and a half year's incarceration that—as long wished—I had an opportunity of having detailed talks with Thakur Nachint Chand Ji. What unfortunate things happened during this period in the State, I need not mention. But this is now realized by every well-wisher of the State that many of the regrettable happenings of the past have mainly been due to the misunderstandings which appear now to have deliberately been created by interested people in order to achieve their own ends. R.B. Ramchandra Kak, the ex-Prime Minister, through his mischievous methods and masterly maneuverings brought these misunderstandings to a climax and succeeded in his attempt, though temporarily, to a certain extent. He painted me and my organization in the darkest colors and in everything that we did or attempted to do to bring Your Highness and your people closer; base and selfish motives were attributed to me. But God be thanked that all these enemies of Your Highness and the State stand exposed today.

In spite of what has happened in the past, I assure Your Highness that myself and my party have never harbored any sentiment of disloyalty towards Your Highness' person, throne or dynasty. The development of this beautiful country and the betterment of its people is our common aim and interest and I assure Your Highness the fullest and loyal support of myself and my organization. Not only this, but I assure Your Highness that any party, within or without the State, which may attempt to create any impediments in our efforts to gain our goal, will be treated as our enemy and will be treated as such.

In order to achieve the common aim set forth above, mutual trust and confidence must be the mainstay. Without this it would not be possible to face successfully the great difficulties that beset our State on all sides at present.

*Before I close this letter I beg to assure Your Highness once again of my steadfast loyalty and pray that God under Your Highness' aegis bring such an era of Peace, Prosperity and Good Government that may be second to none and be an ideal for others to copy.”**

He ended the letter with ‘Your Highness’ Most Obedient Subject, S.M. Abdullah’.

The letter secured the Sheikh’s freedom from the Maharaja’s jail. On October 26, 1947, the Instrument of Accession of Jammu & Kashmir State to the Union of India was signed. It was sealed and delivered on October 27, five days after Pakistan Army in the guise of Pashtun tribals invaded Kashmir. Sheikh Abdullah was nominated as the Head of the Interim Government by the Maharaja. He took charge on October 30, 1947, and organized the defence of the State by raising a force of local volunteers.

One such volunteer was Mohammad Maqbool Sherwani of Baramulla who was the Sheikh’s die-hard loyalist. Since the Sheikh’s overtures to Jinnah during his Kashmir visit in 1944 had fallen flat and he had sided with the Muslim Conference, Sherwani, a mere lad of 19 years, took it upon himself to oppose the leader. He rallied a handful of like-minded friends, and when Jinnah was being facilitated in Baramulla on July 25, 1947, climbed the stage, disrespected him and caused a commotion.

Muslim Conference workers seized him, but he managed to free himself and ran towards the bridge over the Jhelum River. He was surrounded by his political rivals again. Sherwani, however, dodged them and jumped into the swirling river.

But his greatest heroic action was in 1947, when Pakistan-sponsored ‘tribal raiders’ entered Kashmir. In response to his leader’s call to defend Kashmir, Sherwani came up with a daredevil plan. He boldly approached the raiders and volunteered to guide them to Srinagar. He then led them astray, slowing their march by days. It gave the Indian Army time to land at the Srinagar airport on October 27.

Sherwani’s ruse ended on November 7, 1947, when he was in Sumbal, 35 kilometres from Baramulla. The raiders shot him 14 times and brought his body to Baramulla town where they tied it to two pillars of Khan Hotel, near Regina cinema. The mutilated body hung there for several days. The Indian Army honours his ‘courage and sacrifice’ to this day in Baramulla.*

However, as soon as peace returned to J&K in 1948-49, the Sheikh began to air his views on the status of the newly formed State. He told London Observer that as a Kashmiri patriot, he preferred a 'neutral' status for J&K since the Punjabis of Poonch and the Pathans of Gilgit favoured Pakistan, while the Hindus of Jammu were committed to India. He did not mention the Kashmir Valley. Instead, he expounded that an independent state's territorial integrity ought to be recognized and guaranteed by both India and Pakistan. The 'independent' country's status should also be endorsed by the United Nations.

India's Deputy Prime Minister Vallabhbhai Patel reacted strongly to the interview and told the Sheikh in plain words that the idea was preposterous. The Sheikh did not argue his case, he rather rectified his statement through another interview with The Hindu newspaper in May 1949.

But soon after he was assured of a fully NC-dominated Constituent Assembly, on April 10, 1952, he ranted against the idea of full integration of J&K with India as demanded by the Praja Parishad. He called the demand 'unrealistic, childish and savouring of lunacy'. He warned New Delhi against practising communal politics and said that he was not in favour of implementing the Indian Constitution fully in the State. He didn't want any 'interference' of the Centre in the affairs of J&K. The speech, made in Ranbir Singh Pora in Jammu, near the Indo-Pak border, caused an uproar in the country. It was clear that the Sheikh was in a combative mood and weighing his options with regards to Pakistan vis a vis India.

The Sheikh flexed his muscles on the Kashmir autonomy issue because the ground was slipping under his feet. Failure of crops for over a two-year period, 1949-50 and 1950-51, created a serious food crisis in the State. The Union government's food aid was channelled through the State's Food Control Department. Officials of the department passed on the food grain supply to the black market. The price of ration, therefore, sky-rocketed because of profit-taking by unscrupulous elements in the market and in the government.

The State's food procurement drive also added to the misery of the people. Peasants were forced to sell a portion of their crop to the State at low, fixed

rates, and thereafter purchase grain at exorbitant rates to pay land tax, *mujawaza*, in kind. They were squeezed into starvation by the policy.

Similarly, the State cooperative stores, which distributed essential commodities like salt, sugar, cloth, etc. were in the clutches of ‘corruption and malpractices’. Citizens were forced to pay high prices for essential goods by corrupt officials and public representatives who headed these stores. Public resentment against the government was at boiling point. The Sheikh’s Ranbir Singh Pora speech doused it to a considerable extent by diverting the conversation to Kashmiri aspiration of *azadi*.

New Delhi was unhappy. It wanted the Sheikh to issue a clarification, but he pointedly ignored the signals. He wished to govern Kashmir as per his own ideas of ‘autonomy’ and wanted no other opinion on it. He was adamant, and to demonstrate his stand, summoned a session of the Constituent Assembly in Jammu to consider the reports of three sub-committees set up in the previous session.

Sheikh Abdullah’s trusted confidante, Mirza Afzal Beg, declared at the session (held in the spring of 1952) that the Basic Principles Committee was of the view that the State of Jammu and Kashmir should be a republic within the Republic of India. He also announced the abolition of monarchy. Instead, a head of the State—*Sadr-i-Riyasat*—would be elected for a five-year term. Subsequently, the son of Maharaja Hari Singh, Karan Singh, was elected as the *Sadr-i-Riyasat*.

The announcement of a republic within a republic moved Prime Minister Nehru to hurriedly call a conference in New Delhi. He headed the Delhi team himself while the Srinagar delegation was led by the Sheikh and his cabinet colleague, Mirza Afzal Beg. The political signals to New Delhi were already clear—the Sheikh was determined to have his way.

The two sides concluded their parleys by signing the Delhi Agreement on July 24, 1952, in which it was agreed to give the State a special position and status in the Constitution of India. The provision would ensure complete internal autonomy to J&K. Fundamental Rights of the Indian Constitution were to apply to the State, subject to the provision that they did not encroach upon the land reforms initiated by the State government. The

Sheikh, on assuming office, had seized land belonging to local zamindars, mainly Kashmiri Pandits, and distributed it to landless Muslims.

The Agreement limited the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court of India in J&K to inter-state disputes, Fundamental Rights, defence, foreign affairs, and communication. The emergency powers of the President of India were to apply to the State 'only at the request or with the concurrence of the government of the State'.

The Srinagar team made just one concession—it agreed that the State flag and the national flag would be flown together on all official occasions with the national flag flown separately in a supremely distinctive manner.

The concessions by the Centre notwithstanding, Sheikh Abdullah continued to toy with ideas of independence and a pact of some sorts with Pakistan. On top of these reports came the 'highly inflammatory rumour' that the United States was backing the idea of Kashmir independence and that Sheikh Abdullah 'had been encouraged in it when Adlai Stevenson had visited Srinagar in May'.* Adlai Ewing Stevenson was an American politician who was nominated twice—1952 and 1956—as the Democratic party candidate for election as President of the United States against Dwight D Eisenhower. Though he was defeated on both the occasions, he went on to serve as the country's Ambassador to the United Nations from 1961 to 1965.

Nehru told the Lok Sabha on September 17, 1952, when the reports first came in, that they were 'greatly exaggerated'. "I would say in the course of the last few weeks, in the course of last few months and sometime more, hard cases of this type of interference have come before us—individual interference . . . It would not be correct to call it governmental interference, but individuals have not behaved properly, because again you must remember the basic fact that Kashmir is a highly strategic area," he said.

The situation developed rapidly in Srinagar. The masses were angry with the Sheikh because of high prices, maladministration and corruption. His Cabinet colleagues found it hard to go along with his blow-hot-blow-cold style of functioning vis a vis the Central government. The Sheikh's own statements and the rumours of his hobnobbing with foreign powers to seek

independence from India shortly after having thrown in his lot with it, confused the party's political leadership about the real intent of Sheikh Abdullah. A majority of the party's working committee members, including his deputy in the Cabinet, Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, were opposed to the sudden swings in government policy in relation to Government of India.

The Sheikh was at last forced to convene a meeting of the Working Committee in Srinagar in May, 1953 to thrash out the issue. The Committee's sessions lasted three weeks! He spoke about the Delhi Agreement, the 'betrayals' of the Union government in fulfilling the expectations of the Kashmiris, and the need to establish friendly relations with the powers in Pakistan so that Kashmir's case as a 'neutral, independent' state could be forcefully argued at the international fora whenever required.

There were just 19 members in the Committee, but the Sheikh's best efforts to convince them, either on his intention or on his pragmatic political plan, failed. He wanted the Delhi Agreement, for which he held long meetings with Nehru a year earlier, to be rejected by the Working Committee. The Committee instead endorsed it with a majority of 15 votes for and just four against it.

The clear-cut rejection did not deter the Sheikh. He continued to pursue his ideas. In a speech made on July 13, 1953, he said, "These martyrs have prepared us for bigger sacrifices to achieve our freedom and our right of self-determination. If required, our youth would not desist from fighting a liberation war on the lines of Algerian people . . . I regret my mistake of coming in the way of merger with Pakistan. I had fears that they won't treat me well, but I was wrong. Now I feel backstabbed, I no longer trust Indian rulers, we have different ways now."

The Sheikh preferred a three-way division of Jammu and Kashmir as suggested by Sir Owen Dixon. The Constituent Assembly had toyed with the idea too, but the Sheikh fleshed out what is popularly known as the Dixon Plan, in a letter written to Egypt President Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser Hussein. Col. Nasser led the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 that ended the United Kingdom's occupation of the country. The letter was later published by a Jammu-based newspaper Early Times (April 20, 2011) and

Muslim India. Interestingly, Sheikh wrote the letter in 1965 after he was freed from 11 years of incarceration and after Jawaharlal Nehru's death. Col. Nasser had been Nehru's close friend.

The Sheikh gave a brief history of the Kashmir conflict and its impact on global politics in the letter, and said, "No doubt the best and most democratic solution could be through a plebiscite. Should this not be feasible, there are other practicable solutions suggested in the past. One such solution was made by Sri Owen Dixon, the UN Representative appointed to negotiate a settlement between India and Pakistan. Broadly speaking, Sir Owen Dixon proposed that: (a) the southern parts of the state comprising Kathua, Jammu and parts of Udhampur districts (now being predominantly Hindu areas) may be annexed with India; (b) the area, now known as Azad Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan being exclusively Muslim be annexed with Pakistan; (c) the Valley of Kashmir, along with the adjoining areas across Banihal (i.e. the district of Doda and the Niabat of Arnas, Gulab Garh), to be allowed to decide its future through a plebiscite. Leh is to follow the result of plebiscite, held in this territory (Kargil being exclusively Muslim in population to go with the Valley)."

He concluded the letter with an appeal for help. "The above proposal can be a very good basis for discussion between India and Pakistan and Kashmir. It is hoped that friendly countries, interested in a settlement, will take up this proposal at their levels, as well as the international conference. Needless to say that an earnest effort in this direction will be the greatest service to the cause of peace in the world."*

Abdul Gani Goni, who was a member of the J&K Constituent Assembly and was later India's Ambassador to Jordan, told the authors in an interview in December, 2009, "By 1948, Sheikh Sahib had realized his mistake of supporting State's accession with India. He had started dreaming of an independent state and expressed it without any reservations. During those fateful days, Maulana Azad visited Kashmir. Sheikh Abdullah delivered a fiery speech at Hazratbal. Azad also wanted to address the people, but Sheikh Abdullah sabotaged the move. A humiliated and angry Azad immediately left for New Delhi. Soon after, Nehru came to tame his friend

(Sheikh Abdullah). He was accompanied by his sister and Home Minister Dr Katju. They stayed in the Nehru Guest house.

“In their presence, a meeting of the National Conference Working Committee was held. The session continued for four days. The meeting discussed some vital issues pertaining to Kashmir. A defiant Sheikh told Nehru in clear terms that he and Kashmiris were not happy with State’s accession to India. He sought an independent state much to Nehru’s annoyance. However, Nehru being a mature politician controlled his anger and urged Sheikh Abdullah to stay patient for some time. He told Nehru, ‘I and people of Kashmir are not happy with India. Please leave us alone. We want to remain independent.’

“Nehru reacted politely. ‘A park has been named after me in Srinagar. I was under the impression that people from India would come here to enjoy themselves. Anyways, if you want to remain independent, I have no objection. I am going to London for a conference. After I return, I will talk to you.’ Nehru did return from London, but not to give independence to Kashmir. He had planned to cage the roaring lion of Kashmir.”

In his autobiography Sada-e-Bazgaasht , written in Urdu, Goni further said, “Nobody expected Nehru to arrest and dethrone Sheikh sahib. Soon after the working committee meeting, I went to Doda. In Doda, I heard about the arrival of a Union minister Mahavir Tyagi in Srinagar. He was very close to Bakshi. And what happened thereafter is history.”

The State Cabinet’s vexation with ‘Prime Minister’ Sheikh Abdullah grew because of the slow implementation of Delhi Agreement, and the widespread misery among the people. The Sheikh responded by demanding the resignation of Minister for Development, Sham Lal Saraf. The minister refused to resign. He instead asked the ‘PM’ to own up to responsibility, dissolve the Cabinet and form a new government.

Sheikh Abdullah’s Cabinet comprised five members. On August 7, 1953, three members, led by Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, submitted a memorandum to him. They accused him of arbitrary decisions, despotism, inefficiency, maladministration and wanton wastage of public resources. They told him that the Cabinet and the people had lost confidence in him. A

copy of the memorandum was sent to the Sadr-i-Riyasat Karan Singh. He suggested an emergency meeting of the Cabinet wherein the differences could be sorted out amicably; Sheikh Abdullah rejected the proposal.

The Centre watched developments in Kashmir with active interest. The Sheikh and his family were under constant surveillance by the Intelligence Bureau ever since the reports of his contacts with certain political persons from Pakistan had trickled in. Intelligence agencies were apprehensive that the Sheikh was on the brink of precipitating an international crisis. A red alert was, therefore, flashed across the State.

The Sadr-i-Riyasat acted promptly on the memorandum submitted by the Cabinet ministers. He dismissed 'Prime Minister' Sheikh Abdullah on August 8. The next day, he invited Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad to form the new government with the proviso that it would have to seek a vote of confidence from the Assembly. Bakshi assumed the charge of 'Prime Minister' the same day.

The installation did not apparently bother Sheikh Abdullah. He decided to proceed to Gulmarg to spend time with his family and friends. Intelligence agencies, however, believed that the Sheikh left town for a secret rendezvous with a top contact from Pakistan. Rumours were also rife that he would announce 'independence' of Kashmir on August 21, 1953. Intelligence agencies had already collected enough evidence against the Sheikh and his association with Pakistan officials.

Since the Kashmir leader was a personal friend of Prime Minister Nehru, intelligence officials arranged a special briefing for him. Tapes of public speeches and letters written by him were presented to Nehru. He was astounded by the duplicity. The arrest of his friend and the 'Prime Minister' of Jammu & Kashmir was personally cleared by him.

Sheikh Abdullah described the night of his arrest in a letter thus:

"The night of August 9 was very cold. I was staying at the government guest house in Gulmarg while on tour. My wife and children were with me along with my secretary and other staff. At about 4'o clock in the morning, my secretary awakened me and informed me that the Dak Bungalow was

surrounded by armed military police. I came out my room and saw a police superintendent whom I knew personally. I asked him what authority he had to come to the rest house in the middle of the night. Instead of replying, he showed me the warrant for my arrest and pointed to the soldiers armed with machine guns. I asked him to allow me to finish my morning prayers when Maharaja Karan Singh's ADC delivered a letter to me from the Maharaja offering sympathies on my arrest.

The letter also conveyed a notice of my dismissal as Prime Minister. Attached to the letter was another document signed by Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, Sham Lal Safar and Girdhari Lal Dogra, indicating that they had lost confidence in my leadership. At about 4.20 a.m., I bade goodbye to my wife and children and moved under military escort to Udampur, about 175 miles from Gulmarg. I was imprisoned in a house belonging to the ruler of Kashmir and all my communication with the outside world came to an end. After a few days, I learnt that my house in Srinagar had been sealed, and my wife and children were not permitted to stay there."

The arrest of Sheikh Abdullah led to the filing of what is known as the Kashmir Conspiracy case. Apart from the Sheikh and Mirza Afzal Beg, 22 other people were also named as co-conspirators. They had, it was alleged, conspired with Pakistan to create an independent Kashmir by overthrowing the government through violent methods. Submissions made before the court claimed that while the Sheikh was in jail, his wife Begum Akbar Jahan and the accomplices received large amounts of money from Pakistan, besides type writers, litho-machine and propaganda material. Explosives were also received for blowing up bridges, factories, military installations and religious places in the State in order to paralyse the government.

Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad spelt out the reasons for the ouster and arrest of Sheikh Abdullah in a radio broadcast immediately after taking over as 'Prime Minister'. He said, "Recent developments had made it abundantly clear to all of us that a betrayal of the country's interests and the traditions of our democratic struggle was in the offing, which would inevitably have led to grave consequences. None of us could afford to watch complacently the repetition of the events which uprooted the lives of millions of people in the Indian sub-continent in 1947. The slogan of independence was highly

misleading and there should be no doubt as to the motive for sponsoring such an idea in the context of international developments in Asia and other parts of the world.”

The Sheikh’s fellow agitator and comrade-in-arms during the many battles against the Maharaja said sadly, “An independent Kashmir under the influence of an imperialist power will be grave threat to freedom and independence of Indian and Pakistani people. In view of the geographical position of the State, such independence is bound to involve us in a bitter and violent controversy and another Korea may be staged here as a result of the armed conflict between interested powers.”

He reaffirmed that ‘the secular and democratic traditions and ideology of our national movement have established indissoluble links with the democratic movement in India’, and emphasized that in ‘times of historic crisis when the fate of millions was at stake, personal relations and affections had to be subordinated to the paramount interests of the country.’

The Kashmir Conspiracy case ensured Sheikh Abdullah spent 11 years behind bars. His release was as dramatic as his arrest. The government dropped all cases against him, and ironically, Nehru again trusted him to undertake a mission to Pakistan in 1964 to talk about the resolution of the Kashmir issue. Nehru died while Sheikh was being feted in Pakistan. Fate nipped a historic opportunity in the bud.

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Chapter

10

Farooq Abdullah dazzled a motley group of shopkeepers and shoppers when he rode into the busy Lal Chowk area of Srinagar on a shiny red Rajdoot-Yamaha 350 cc motorbike. His stylish Ray-Ban Aviator sunglasses reflected the mid-day sun in its muted glory. As the crowds gaped at the newly elected Chief Minister, he brought his bike to a sudden halt near a traffic constable and berated him for not performing his duties properly. He spent a few more minutes going around the bazar, checking the traffic flow before he revved up the bike again and disappeared with the whoosh of the powerful motorcycle engine. People had dropped whatever they were doing and intently looked at him for a moment when he had driven in. They expected him to stay and chat with them. But, when Farooq did not do so, they shrugged and went back to work.

A few days later, the young Chief Minister boarded J&K State Road Transport Corporation buses one after another. He carried out spot checks on ticketless travel and detected bus conductors' complicity in pocketing a portion of the fare. Five errant conductors were later charge-sheeted. The Chief Minister, it was broadcast, was on the move to tone up public services and eradicate corruption at the lowest rung of the State machinery.

Congress State head Mufti Mohammad Sayeed was not impressed. "Such antics do not behove a Chief Minister," he commented dryly.

Though the June 1983 electoral victory brought Farooq Abdullah a cascade of accolades from the Press and the opposition parties of the country, it also sharpened the Congress' attack on him. He was now its No. 1 target, and

since the polling and counting of votes had not gone neatly, it provided ample fodder to a legal and political campaign against the newly installed Chief Minister.

The major ‘illegality’, the Congress alleged, was in the candidature of Farooq Abdullah himself. Ghulam Mohiuddin Salati, who contested against Farooq from the Ganderbal seat, claimed that his rival was neither an Indian citizen nor a permanent resident of J&K and, therefore, ineligible to stand for elections.

In an election petition, Salati said that under the Constitution of Jammu & Kashmir, only a permanent resident of the State, who is also a voter in the State, can contest elections. Similarly, the Indian Constitution stipulated that only a citizen of India can be a voter (or a candidate) in India, Jammu & Kashmir included. Farooq was not a citizen, the petition noted and pleaded that his election should be set aside on this ground.

The petition said Farooq Abdullah migrated to the UK in 1964. He was issued a British passport at Peter Burrough on December 12, 1972. He returned to India in 1977, and applied for registration as an Indian citizen on November 14, 1977, after living for six months in Delhi and Srinagar. The Deputy Commissioner of Srinagar, who was also the competent authority, issued a certificate on the same day. Farooq’s father, the late Sheikh Abdullah, was the Chief Minister of the State at the time. The Deputy Commissioner, Srinagar, issued certificates not only to Farooq, but to Mollie Eileen Abdullah, his wife, and their three children, Omar, Safia and Hina, as well.

Chaudhary Charan Singh was the Union Home Minister in 1977, and when he learnt of Farooq’s bid to gain citizenship, he opened the question of his nationality. The Joint Secretary, Union Home Ministry, J.C. Pandey, in his letter dated June 23, 1978, wrote to the Home Secretary, Jammu & Kashmir, that ‘no person who has renounced, or has been deprived of his Indian citizenship, or whose Indian citizenship has terminated under this Act (Citizenship Act) shall be registered as a citizen of India under sub section (1), except by order of the Central Government.’

The Deputy Commissioner of Srinagar replied that the certificate was given to Farooq Abdullah because, in his application of November 14, 1977, he made no mention that he had renounced Indian citizenship and acquired a British passport. The Home Ministry, the petition said, had taken a serious view of the lapse.

But before the issue could be fully processed, Charan Singh resigned from his post on June 29, 1978. Prime Minister Morarji Desai took additional charge of the Home Ministry. Desai and Sheikh Abdullah enjoyed a close personal rapport. The citizenship issue, therefore, took another turn. Farooq, his family members, including his brother Tariq, who had represented Pakistan as its diplomat at the United Nations, were asked to file fresh applications. A new registration number was subsequently issued to Farooq on January 17, 1979.

Salati's petition read: "The petitioner verily believes that the respondent has not become a citizen of India. In any event citizenship has been conferred on him contrary to law. The petitioner further submits that even if he is a citizen of India, he is not a State Subject of Class I or Class II and as such not entitled to be an elector and thus not entitled to contest . . . Article 370 of the Constitution of India (which guarantees special rights for Jammu & Kashmir) is a bar for conferring the status of a State Subject on any person who is not a State Subject."*

The ticklish question in the petition that asked for his disqualification was whether the status of a State Subject of Jammu & Kashmir is independent of the person's nationality, or that the status can be relinquished and retaken at will by people who were originally State Subjects.

Salati's petition was not the only one challenging the electoral process. The Congress and National Conference had filed 72 election petitions against each other out of the 76 Assembly constituencies in the State. Indira Gandhi had personally deputed M.C. Bhandare, Rajya Sabha member and an eminent Supreme Court lawyer, to Srinagar for this purpose. He hired 20 typists who worked in seven hotel rooms for over a week to ready the petitions running into a total of 800 pages.

Legal counsel apart, the Congress was on a multi-pronged offensive to demand a total re-poll in the State because 'NC was a government by fraud'. "Delhi should intervene today, else Islamabad will intervene tomorrow," Congress leaders said hotly when they demanded the dismissal of a couple of weeks old Farooq government. Its vote share of 35 per cent in the State and 23 per cent in the Valley had bolstered its confidence.

The battle was waged in the Assembly too. During the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the Governor, Congress brought up several issues concerning the Abdullah family and their acquisition of large leasehold properties. Moulvi Iftikhar Hussein Ansari, the leader of the Shia's in the Valley, who had won his seat against all odds, tabled as many as 16 questions regarding 'controversial leases' awarded to the family, including the lease of the huge property on Gupkar Road where Farooq had lived since 1979.

Sonam Gyalsen, the party MLA from Leh in the Ladakh region, also tabled an adjournment motion seeking clarification from Farooq on one of his statements where he had said that the Union Government had agreed to accord Scheduled Tribe status only to the people of Leh and not to the residents of the Muslim-dominated Kargil. The next day, when the members pressed for a discussion, the Speaker turned down the request. Moulvi Iftikhar then stood up with a copy of the letter written by the Prime Minister's Secretariat, stating that Scheduled Tribe status had been granted to both Leh and Kargil. The Congress accused Farooq of misleading the House and demanded a privilege motion against him.

The Speaker ignored their cries. Bedlam ensued in the Assembly. Legislators lay down in the Well of the House. G. Mohiuddin Shah, the PWD minister, asked the Speaker to throw them out of the House. The messy scenes resulted in the suspension of 23 Congress MLAs from the proceedings. The lawmakers represented to the Governor B.K. Nehru and urged him to resolve the 'constitutional deadlock'. Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah said 'local johnnies' of the Congress had created an unnecessary fuss in the State.

Moulvi Iftikhar then led a march of thousands of people from Srinagar to his Assembly constituency, Pattan, a distance of about 25 kilometres, in

protest against the high-handedness of the government and demanded its dismissal.

Though Farooq Abdullah was in a combative mood, he was apprehensive too. Srinagar was rife with rumours of his immediate dismissal. There was enough material on record that showed Farooq used religion in his election campaign. An election petition filed by Abdul Aziz, the Congress Amira Kadal constituency candidate, alleged that Farooq was guilty of corrupt practices under the Jammu & Kashmir Representation of the People Act, 1957. He had used the Hazratbal shrine and Jamia Masjid, both religious places, to launch the election campaign.

“On every Friday large gatherings of Muslims congregate at these places for offering their prayers. The occasion of Shab-e-Miraj, which fell on Friday, the 13th May 1983, has a great significance (being) one of the two occasions on which the relic of Hazratbal shrine is exposed for public view. On that day, there was a congregation of over 3 lakhs or so at the Hazratbal shrine. Dr Farooq Abdullah, instead of restricting himself to joining prayers with others . . . repeated his earlier allegation that the Congress was responsible for the alleged theft of the holy relic in 1963. He said even today that they (Congress-I) were resorting to the same tactic.”*

A spate of petitions and protest rallies worried Farooq. He was anxious that the High Court may order some extraordinary measures for disposal of the petitions. The Union Government’s move to transfer Chief Justice Bahauddin Farooqi to the High Court of Sikkim was seen by him in this light. He refused to allow him to go. He argued that by transferring Justice Farooqi, the Centre had interfered in the affairs of the State ‘even on judicial matters’. He vented his anger fully, “It is the Congress which rigged every election in Jammu & Kashmir before 1977. These fellows in Delhi have been interfering in our affairs not from today but from the father’s time. Mrs Gandhi does not want to give us peace.”

The acrimony with the Congress apart, Farooq’s huge victory gave him pan-India ideas. Sheikh Abdullah limited himself to Kashmir and to ideas of its azadi. Farooq, on the other hand, was convinced he could carve out a definitive niche for himself in non-Congress politics. The fact that he was a young, articulate, modern Muslim leader would help secure a definite

constituency among the 10-crore plus Muslim population in the country. He told India Today he planned to bring together all Muslim legislators in the country as well as opinion-builders and leaders of the community. “This is going to be the biggest ever event of its kind. My mission in life is to convince the country that the Indian Muslims are just as much Indians as anybody else.”

In other words, Farooq wanted to assert his own politics—he could not be just another pliant Chief Minister. He was rather a national opposition leader in his own right. He, therefore, maintained live contact with the four main opposition leaders—H.N. Bahuguna of the Democratic Socialist Party; Atal Behari Vajpayee, President of the Bharatiya Janata Party; Chandra Shekhar, Janata Party President; and N.T. Rama Rao, Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh and leader of the Telugu Desam.

Back home, his critics thought of him as ‘juvenile, vainglorious and a prisoner of his own fantasies and false promises’. They pointed to his government’s dismal performance in sectors crucial to the State’s economy—tourism, handicrafts and horticulture. Inflow of foreign tourists had dropped from 50,000 a year earlier to 30,000 due to the uncertain situation in the Valley. Domestic tourists were also scarce. Hotels offered a 75 per cent discount on their room tariff to snap up the thin traffic. Carpet exports were down by 20 per cent; the shawl industry had suffered a revenue fall to such an extent that many manufacturers had closed their units for good.

Simultaneously, he was faced with the problem of the psychological and political cleavage between the Hindu majority Jammu and the predominantly Muslim Kashmir Valley. And, along the Srinagar–Leh highway, the Buddhists were agitating against Kashmiri domination. In the heart of the Valley, eight lakh Shia Muslims were upset with Sunni domination.

It was a complex situation that demanded a mature, nuanced response from the political leadership. Every one wished Farooq emerged as a far-sighted, sanguine leader committed to the Kashmiri public cause rather than be the pop star of opposition politics. Kashmir needed him desperately.

*“Legality about Farooq Abdullah’s Indian citizenship questioned.” India Today. July 18, 2013. <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/special-report/story/19830815-legality-about-farooq-abdullahs-indian-citizenship-questioned-770901-2013-07-18>

*Mitra, Sumit. “Relations between ruling National Congress and Congress (I) deteriorate in J&K.” India Today, 1983. Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/special-report/story/19830815-relations-between-ruling-national-conference-and-congressi-deteriorate-in-j-k-770898-2013-07-18>

Chapter

11

On October 13, 1983, the Sher-e-Kashmir stadium in Srinagar hosted its first-ever international cricket match against the West Indies. The Indian team was riding high on its momentous World Cup victory in June that year. It was the darling of crowds across the expanse of the country because Kapil Dev and his boys had pulled off one of the most spectacular wins ever in World Cup and cricketing history.

The match had specially been scheduled in Srinagar after much debate and controversy. Farooq headed the J&K Cricket Association, and when the Centre and the Indian cricket board initially disallowed the fixture because of the volatile law and order situation in the State, he moved the President of India, N. Sanjiva Reddy. The match was granted to the venue after his intervention.

The West Indies squad comprised all-time greats such as Clive Llyod, Vivian Richards, Desmond Haynes, Gordon Greenidge, Michael Holding, Malcolm Marshall and Andy Roberts. The Indian team was led by Kapil Dev, with stars like Sunil Gavaskar, Dilip Vengsarkar, Srikant, Sandeep Patil and Kirmani adding to the dazzle. Between the two teams, India was on a high since they had beaten the mighty West Indies twice during the World Cup. The evening preceding the one-day match was full of gaiety and laughter as the two teams mingled with Kashmir dignitaries over a fancy dinner.

The morning after though turned out to be a lot different. Overnight rain had made the pitch wet, and a cold breeze blew across the packed Sher-e-

Kashmir stadium. West Indies won the toss and put the Indians to bat under difficult conditions. But when the Indian opening pair walked out of pavilion to take guard at the crease, the stadium erupted as if on cue. The crowd booed the Indian players and raised anti-India slogans. The batsmen were mystified by the venomous hostility. "I don't think the Indian players were really upset by the behaviour of the crowd. They were stunned," Gavaskar wrote in his book *Runs 'n' Ruins*. "Being hooted at after a defeat is understandable, but this was incredible. Moreover, there were many in the crowd shouting pro-Pakistan slogans which confounded us, because we were playing the West Indies and not Pakistan."

As wickets fell, the jeering increased. The batsmen were booed and abused whenever they hit a boundary or took cheeky singles. The cold air sizzled with the intense chants of India Murdabad and Pakistan Zindabad. India could score just 176 runs. A gritty Shrikant contributed painstakingly, and made 40 runs amidst the heat of vicious sloganeering prompted by the Jamaat-e-Islami men.

There was silence in both the camps when the teams returned to the pavilion for lunch. Never in the annals of cricketing history, or in any sporting event, had spectators behaved in such an atrocious manner. The cricketers' gloom was compounded when a group of hooligans ran into the field and tried to dig up the pitch. The police politely chased them away before they could inflict serious damage.

The match began post-lunch and Indian cricketers were again targeted by the boorish crowd. It loudly cheered runs scored by the West Indies batsmen but hurled filthy abuses, empty bottles and stones at Indian players. Sunil Gavaskar was specially targeted, and though he tried to pacify the crowd by humouring it, he soon gave up the effort. At one point, skipper Kapil Dev wanted to leave the field with the team, but he was persuaded by officials to soldier on. The match had to be completed, irrespective of the sordid situation, he was told, even though it was clear to all concerned that the crowd had been rallied with the specific purpose of heaping humiliation on the home cricket team; and to send a message to New Delhi.

Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah watched the proceedings impassively. He made no effort to either pacify the crowd or to bring in the police. At the

post-match dinner, however, he regretted the incident, and wished the teams would move on and play the remaining games of the series with full gusto.

The fall-out of the major embarrassment was along expected lines. The Centre said the State government was hand-in-glove with Pakistan-based separatists and had encouraged the Jamaat-e-Islami. It noted with concern that members of Jamiat-i-Tulba, the party's youth wing, had provoked the crowd into sloganeering and throwing bottles and stones at the Indian cricketers. They had also prominently displayed the flag of the Jamaat at the stadium. The Chief Minister had lost control over law and order situation in the State, it said.

The cricket episode was perhaps the 'first phase of a general Islamic rebellion against the Hindu domination of New Delhi'. It was 'more than a clash of parties on a specific occasion or over a specific issue', it was rather that the Islamic rebellion 'was being injected into the Vale of Kashmir'.* The Jamaat and Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front had threatened violence earlier too when the first international match was to be played in Kashmir in 1978. But it had remained an empty threat.

Farooq himself was not too concerned about the incident. "I was the Chairman of the J&K Cricket Association at the time, and with the backing of the State Government, we had to seek the intervention of the President of India, Shri Sanjiva Reddy, and the match was played without any incident."*

A month after the match, Farooq took the crease to hit at Indira Gandhi acolyte Swami Dharendra Brahmachari. On November 19, 1983, the Chief Minister, accompanied by a police team, raided the premises of Swami-owned Shiva Gun Factory in Jammu. The licensed factory had violated some provisions of the Arms Act, police officials claimed, and seized gun barrels with Spanish markings. Two employees were arrested. Brahmachari rushed to court to seek anticipatory bail in case the police moved for of his arrest.

In a writ petition, Brahmachari said Farooq wanted to 'embarrass Mrs Indira Gandhi' and seek his 'revenge' through the 'abuse and misuse of powers'.

“By leading the raid,” Brahmachari mentioned in writ no. 667 of 1988 filed in the High Court of Jammu and Kashmir at Jammu, “Farooq emitted another spark—the first one which he emitted at Mantalai complex was one reflecting his passion for pleasures, whereas the second one gave a true picture of his vulnerability to anger and his disregard to his oath under the Constitution to do justice to all manner of people without fear or favour, without affection or ill will.”

Farooq did not ‘feel content’ with the raid on the gun factory, he said. Next day, the Chief Minister was in New Delhi discussing with opposition MPs about the Brahmachari affair. On November 21, when non-Congress members staged a walk-out from the Lok Sabha demanding a statement from the Union Government, Farooq was seated in the VIP enclosure ‘in order to defame and denigrate’ Brahmachari and Mrs Gandhi. He ‘came over to Delhi, contacted Members of Parliament belonging to opposition parties and persuaded them to raise the issue on the floor of Parliament’. Those who raised the issue included Dr Subramanian Swamy and Ram Vilas Paswan of Janata Party; Harikesh Bahadur, Ram Lal Rahi, DSP, Abdul Rashid Kabuli of NC; and S.S. Chakraborty of CPI. CPI (M) wanted to move a resolution congratulating Farooq Abdullah, but it was disallowed by the Speaker.

When the demand was raised in the Lok Sabha, Congress member K.K. Tiwari spotted Farooq watching the proceedings of the House from the distinguished persons’ gallery. He pointed it out to the Speaker, but he was over-ruled. Tiwari was told not to refer to anybody in the gallery.

In the Rajya Sabha, shortly after the question hour, Era Sodziam, Janata Party; A.G. Kulkarni, Congress(S); and other opposition members raised the issue. After some debate, the Deputy Chairman conceded the Opposition demand for a statement on the issue of guns seized from Brahmachari’s factory.

The petition said that the presence of the Chief Minister in the distinguished persons’ gallery ‘showed beyond doubt his anxiety’ to ensure that Brahmachari was ‘denigrated’ and the Indira Gandhi was ‘embarrassed’.

Though Farooq was successful in executing some deft footwork in political dealings, he was yet to deliver in administrative matters. There was simmering public ire against him in the Valley. D.D. Thakur, a die-hard Sheikh loyalist who had played a significant role in Farooq becoming Chief Minister, was bitterly disappointed with his performance. “We expected a lot of things from this young budding politician. All of us genuinely believed that he would be able to wear his father’s mantle well, but within three months, he proved himself unfit to rule a State like Jammu & Kashmir.”

He also neglected the party and ignored grassroots workers. The central office did nothing to counter Congress’ campaign against him. “Farooq treats the party as his pocket borough. He did not convene any meetings of district-level office-bearers and even ignored repeated requests from MLAs to call the legislature party meetings. Opposition to the Government is considered a personal affront to Farooq himself,” Thakur said. Many party men felt that Farooq’s style of functioning left no room for discussion and debate because even senior legislators and ministers were repeatedly humiliated and snubbed by him.

The simmering dissidence and laments by party loyalists were bolstered by Farooq’s own casual attitude towards the State administration. India Today reported that Farooq attended office only for seven days in a month and he was in the State for less than 200 of the 385 days he was Chief Minister. The report claimed that he abandoned Cabinet or official meetings in mid-deliberation and disappeared to unknown destinations. “Unlike his father, Farooq was never seriously interested in administration. It was always a one-sided affair, with all of us initiating discussion and notes with no response from him,” a senior official rued. Of Farooq’s 30-odd Cabinet meetings, the report said, only six lasted over two hours and over a dozen ended without completing the agenda.

The situation, the Congress felt, was ripe for picking. The Tribune newspaper story on September 2, 1983, was headlined ‘Revolt in the Making’. It reported the re-emergence of Farooq’s brother-in-law G.M. Shah ‘in the political field after a long silence which appeared to suggest retirement from the power game. It was now clear that Mr. Shah’s silence

over a period of some three months was a strain which he could not bear endlessly. He decided to join hands with a former political enemy, Mr. D.D. Thakur, in what looks like an attempt to destabilize the Government and to overthrow Farooq Abdullah. The attitude of Mr. Thakur will not surprise many. Although he was close to Sheikh Abdullah and supported Farooq Abdullah for the leadership of the party, he was known for some time to be drifting away from the latter.'

The report also suggested that the conflict that was resolved between Shah and Thakur was mainly an affair at State level motivated by the wish to overthrow a common political enemy. Both of them looked at the Centre, specifically the Prime Minister's office, to help them in executing their scheme against Farooq Abdullah. Thakur was the first to be called in by Indira Gandhi.

Thakur admitted to his meeting 'with surprising frankness' and detailed what took place behind the scenes. "Indira Gandhi asked, 'How do you go about Kashmir?' and then I said that this is one of the ways which we can do. She asked, 'Can you do it?' I said, 'Yes I am capable of doing it.' Indira Gandhi said, 'But who is the horse that you are going to flog then?' I said, 'G.M. Shah.' Indira Gandhi said 'But you are not pulling on well with him, how do you do it?' I said, 'I'll surrender, I'll win him over.' And then I went to Kashmir. Then I had a meeting with G.M. Shah at my son in-law's house, where he came for dinner. And we planned the entire thing, and I came back and reported to her that this is the line of acting.'"

G.M Shah went to New Delhi and met Indira Gandhi. He told the Central leadership that Farooq was unpopular not only within the party, but also with the masses and the time had come to unseat him from power. "Don't worry about anything," Indira Gandhi told him, "We will support you and arrange all the funds you may need."

"If you do, rest assured I will reduce National Conference to dust and ashes in Kashmir," he said with confidence.

In December, Shah said that he had six MLAs who were ready to abandon Farooq, and by March, the figure rose to ten. Shah met Governor B.K.

Nehru, but he was not impressed by his claim. Nehru asked him to go for a trial of strength in the Assembly through a no-confidence motion.

Undaunted by Nehru's rebuff, Shah tried three times to assemble the 12 MLA's and stage the family coup between March and April. According to his son, Muzaffar Shah, "We tried for two consecutive days in April, but somehow it didn't click. At one point, we had the support of 21 MLAs but all of them didn't turn up at the fixed place and time."

Farooq Abdullah was under constant attack thereafter from two fronts. While Shah and Thakur were set on splitting the party from within, Mrs Gandhi sharpened her public comments on Farooq Abdullah. She accused him of sheltering 'insurgents' and warned that she would not accept any anti-national activities in Jammu and Kashmir. Rajiv Gandhi publicly predicted an invasion of Jammu and Kashmir by Pakistan. The State Congress claimed that Farooq Abdullah was a member of Pakistan-based Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front. The message from the Central government was clear—Farooq Abdullah was a threat to national security.

Congress volunteers picketed courts, blocked roads, torched buses and houses, and provoked police firings in which over a dozen people were killed from October 1983 to February 1984 to demand his ouster. Union ministers Ghulam Nabi Azad and Mohammad Arif Khan submitted a memorandum to President Zail Singh in which they alleged the breakdown of the law and order machinery in the State. They called for the Centre's intervention.

An AICC pamphlet 'The Challenge in Kashmir' charged Farooq with turning a blind eye to six gurmat camps that were organized in his State by the banned All India Sikh Students Federation. Over 600 young men had received combat training in these camps. Home Minister Sethi wrote a strongly worded letter to the State government in which he listed the activities of anti-national elements in J&K, including the burning of the national flag at various places. He also cited the disturbance during the cricket match as evidence of increasing pro-Pak activities. Farooq paid little heed to the allegations. He shrugged them off and continued to build his presence on the opposition platform at the national level.

On January 24, 1984, he was summoned to Delhi for a meeting with the Prime Minister on the law and order situation. A number of violent clashes had taken place in the preceding months, and a few days earlier, six members of the Congress were killed in a confrontation.

Arun Nehru was the first one to take on Farooq in order to bring him 'in line'. "Now, you listen," I told Farooq, 'you listen when the PM speaks. Mrs Gandhi has clearly said that it only takes one signature to get rid of Farooq.' So he begged for mercy, he was told to behave by Mrs Gandhi, and he got a second chance and he went back, and the first thing he does when he comes home is to take a vote of confidence! This was his disaster and a most stupid thing to do."*

The meeting convinced Farooq Abdullah that there was a conspiracy to dismiss him and, on January 27, 1984, he sought a vote of confidence in the Assembly to protect himself. The victory on the floor of the House strengthened his political position, but it cost him the sympathy of his powerful ally Governor B. K. Nehru. He was unhappy that Farooq acted unconstitutionally by not giving advance notice of the vote of confidence. He was also upset that the Chief Minister failed to honour the 'understanding' arrived at the talks with the Prime Minister. Arun Nehru described the situation aptly: "A hostile government in a sensitive border state became unacceptable."

The Congress top leadership pressed Governor B.K. Nehru 'every day' to dismiss the government. "She decided to depose Farooq at whatever cost. I refused to do that because it was not only unconstitutional but it was politically highly undesirable and dangerous. So, Jagmohan was sent to do it."*

*Lamb, Alastair, Birth of a Tragedy: Kashmir 1947 (UK: Roxford Books, 1994)

*Sahni, Sati, My Dismissal: Farooq Abdullah as told to Sati Sahni (India: Vikas, 1985)

*Widmalm, Sten, Kashmir In Comparative Perspective: Democracy And Violent Separatism In India (UK: Routledge Curzon, 2002)

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*Widmalm, Sten, Kashmir In Comparative Perspective: Democracy And Violent Separatism In India (UK: Routledge Curzon, 2002)

Chapter

12

It was about 6.30 in the morning on July 2, 1984.

Farooq Abdullah had taken a few sips from his morning cup of tea when the phone rang. Governor Jagmohan wanted to see him immediately.

Farooq shrugged irritably at the sun-rise call and walked into the bath. He was in no mood for homilies at this hour from a bureaucrat once known as a Sanjay Gandhi acolyte. Jagmohan gained notoriety during the Emergency (1975–77) when he carried out the demolition of hutments at the Turkman Gate in Delhi. Jagmohan had arrived in Srinagar following the ‘transfer’ of Governor B.K. Nehru to Gujarat.

It had been a relaxing week for the Chief Minister. The festival of Eid was virtually a week-long holiday full of festivities and good cheer. On Eid day, Farooq played a round of golf, shared delicacies with friends and family, and the next day drove about 60 kilometres on a motorcycle to personally apprehend timber smugglers in a remote corner of the densely forested Valley. He had plans to tour Jammu on July 2.

In fact, the Jammu trip was on Farooq’s mind when the Governor called; and despite the odd hour of the call and the urgency of the summons, it did not strike Farooq that something serious was amiss.

Jagmohan met Farooq at 7.15 a.m. and handed him a photocopy of a letter and asked for his resignation in writing. Jagmohan’s letter read: “Thirteen MLAs of the Legislative Assembly of Jammu & Kashmir have approached

me in person this morning. They told me, and have given in writing, that they have withdrawn their support to your government and pledge their support to G.M. Shah, MLC. I am satisfied that you no longer enjoy the majority support of the Assembly and have, therefore, forfeited the right to continue as Chief Minister and to head the Government. In these circumstances, I advise you to submit your resignation as Chief Minister forthwith.”*

The letter apart, Farooq was shocked to see that his brother-in-law had finally managed to engineer the defections without raising his suspicion. It was a bolt from the blue on a fine July morning. Farooq was incensed and couldn't contain himself. He thumped the table angrily and shouted at Jagmohan, “Do what you like but don't let that man become Chief Minister.” But the die was already cast and all of Farooq's shock, anger and frustration could not take away from the humiliating unseating.

The final act of parting was sudden. Though Farooq knew about dissidence, he had no clue about the sense of hurt that the MLAs harboured against him. The defections reduced Farooq's 46-member legislature party to a minority group of 34 in the 78-member House. Shah, with the support of the 26 Congress members, was in majority.

The two factions of the NC were feuding for several months. Bolstered by Congress support, Shah launched a movement against his brother-in-law. The feud reached its climax on April 24, 1984, when Shah's wife, Khalida, was brutally attacked by NC supporters on her way to address a public meeting at Beehama, a small hamlet on the outskirts of Ganderbal town. The attack incensed Shah.

He carefully worked out, with the aid and advice of D.D. Thakur, a plan to split the NC. He summoned a delegate session of National Conference on May 23, which declared itself as the 'real' NC. The session saw the attendance of '2,400 of the 3,800 delegates'. The delegates elected Khalida as president of the party and 'expelled' Farooq from it. The session authorized Khalida to take appropriate steps to dethrone Farooq from power.

Stung by the act, Farooq Abdullah held a separate convention a few days later with his group of followers. Farooq's session, however, was a reaction to a definite political action by Shah and Khalida. The action by the 'splinter group' led by Shah was instrumental in the High Court's subsequent ruling that the 'defection' in July was legal.

Shah and Khalida then embarked on a whirlwind mass contact programme in the State. They addressed over a hundred public and party meetings, and strengthened their bonds with the cadre along the way.

The NC split provided cover for Congress to go into action behind the screen. Though the political conspiracy to unseat Farooq had been hatched thrice since December 1983, it had failed on all the occasions. The failures were a blessing in disguise. They made Farooq smug in his belief of invincibility and, therefore, careless. On the other hand, they gave Shah the necessary input on the weakest links in Farooq's command chain.

Shah started the toppling game on the eve of the festival of Eid. On June 28, he organized an Eid party at Centaur Hotel that was attended by the would-be deserters. The final plan of action and its timing was chalked out in the hotel, and as a final act of subterfuge, the group visited Farooq to wish him a happy festive season. The Chief Minister welcomed them affably. He had no clue that his well-wishers had come after sharpening their knives for a stab in his back a couple of days later. As many as 10 MLAs had already signed a letter to the Governor informing him of their decision to withdraw support from the government.

That the ouster move was in the works for over a fortnight and the Congress was abreast with every detail was evident when on June 23, Mufti Mohammed Sayed, State Congress chief, was summoned to Delhi and ordered to support a dissident government headed by Shah when it came into being. Simultaneously, Governor Jagmohan spent three days in Delhi discussing steps to combat extremism in the State, and also ways and means of putting a new dispensation in power with the minimum of fuss.

The final days before the meeting with Governor were a carefully worked out cloak-and-dagger operation. While Shah stayed at home, his son Muzaffar split the dissidents into three groups and took them to different

hide-outs in the city. Shah's top advisors, Thakur and M.N. Kochak—both former ministers in the Sheikh Abdullah's Cabinet—went off to Pahalgam on a fishing holiday.

The conspirators lay low for 36 hours, and on the evening of July 1, they assembled in the home of a friendly industrialist. Late at night, at 11.15 p.m., Shah telephoned Jagmohan to announce that he would like to present 12 MLAs who had withdrawn support from the Farooq ministry. Shah wanted the coup to take place that night itself, but Jagmohan advised against doing anything 'during the dark hours'. He asked Shah to come to Raj Bhawan early in the morning.

Though Shah was put on hold, Jagmohan himself got busy detailing New Delhi on the move and securing a contingency plan to deal with mass protest and possible violence. Additional paramilitary forces—over 2,000 armed men from the Border Security Force (BSF), the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and other paramilitary units—were lined up during those six hours from far off stations in UP and MP, for an airlift to Srinagar at first break of dawn. Indian Airlines disrupted its schedule and ferried in the troops in four Airbuses and two Boeings. The local BSF units were also asked to move in to take position at strategic points in the city, while the Army Corps Commander in Kashmir was formally requested to be available for consultation.

At 5.15 a.m., before the break of dawn and still under the cover of darkness, Shah and his 12 MLAs and two MLCs arrived in four cars at Raj Bhawan. Shah handed the June 28 letter to Jagmohan signed by the legislators withdrawing support from the Farooq government. The Governor, however, wanted a fresh letter signed by the law makers in his presence. Another letter was quickly prepared and signed to the satisfaction of Jagmohan. Ali Mohammed Naik, an independent MLA, handed a separate letter pledging his support to Shah.

Even as Jagmohan was speaking to the MLAs, Moulvi Iftikhar Hussain Ansari, leader of the 26-member Congress group, arrived and handed him another letter assuring the party's unconditional support to Shah.

He clarified to the Governor that the party's only objective was to get rid of the anti-national and communal government (of Farooq Abdullah). "We are not interested in power at the moment." He remained with the 12 NC legislators who were unwilling to leave Raj Bhawan for fear of reprisals by Farooq supporters.

Farooq was dumbfounded by the swift turn of events. He asked Jagmohan for time to consult with his colleagues. He returned home, and after consulting his Cabinet colleagues and party functionaries for over two hours, sent a long letter to Jagmohan in which he claimed that the 13 defectors had lost the right to vote. He wrote: "I, therefore, reiterate that the Assembly be summoned forthwith so that on my failure to demonstrate confidence of the House, we can next consider the options available to us under the Constitution of the State. If, however, you do not want conform to this democratic method, I, on behalf of my Cabinet, would request you to accept our advice of dissolving the Legislative Assembly so that we can go back to our people."*

Jagmohan proposed the option of Governor's rule. Farooq asserted that 'democratic traditions require that the question of loss of confidence should always be tested on the floor of the House'. Jagmohan should, therefore, summon the legislature for the purpose. Jagmohan replied that 'the surcharged atmosphere' did not allow the Assembly to be convened. He was disappointed by Farooq Abdullah's failure to accept the option of Governor's rule.

Jagmohan contacted Indira Gandhi at 11 a.m. on July 2. She agreed with the Governor's rule suggestion. Shah and Thakur were not happy with the decision. A meeting of the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Political Affairs was, therefore, convened post haste in Delhi. It overruled the option. Arun Nehru said, "Let there be a split in the National Conference; Shah will not last a year." At 3:00 p.m., the Cabinet Sub-Committee's decision was communicated to Jagmohan. He served the dismissal letter to Farooq and installed Shah as Chief Minister. Thakur was sworn in as Deputy Chief Minister, while the rest of the defectors were accommodated in ministerial positions.

At 5.30 p.m., while Farooq raged at home, his elder sister Khalida and younger brother Tariq, led a crowd of 200 to Raj Bhawan to felicitate the new Chief Minister. Khalida said after the swearing in, “My brother had lost the moral support of the people. His ouster will mark the beginning of stable and clean administration in the State. Barring a few noises, the State is happy with the smooth change-over.”

However, the ‘few noises’ soon snowballed into a clamour of protest across the State, especially in the Valley. For a full week, Srinagar witnessed a total shut down and an indefinite curfew was imposed to contain the unrest. Farooq himself stayed indoors for the first 24 hours because he feared his presence would worsen the situation, but hundreds of people defied the restrictions and marched to his house chanting Gul Shah–Chor Shah, Marqazi Sarkar Murdabad (Gul Shah is a thief, down with the Central government) and Indira Gandhi Murdabad. The police fired tear gas shells and bullets to clear the area.

Though the Centre insisted that Jagmohan committed no Constitutional impropriety by installing Shah, the dismissal of Farooq Abdullah was generally regarded as unconstitutional and a breach of democratic norms by political leaders across the board.

The unseating, however, got Farooq to do a quick double flip on his equation with Mrs Gandhi. At a public rally, three days after his ouster, Farooq consoled his supporters by saying, “We are not alone in this hour of grief of the Kashmiri people. The entire country is with us.” The crowd took the cue and chanted the old slogan, Muslim-Hindu bhai bhai, Indira Gandhi hai–hai, and, later, raised pro-Pakistan slogans. The ‘nationalist’ Farooq jumped off the stage and beat up his supporters with shoes and bamboo sticks. He would not tolerate such slogans, he shouted angrily and walked out of the venue in a huff.

*Chawla, Prabhu. “Farooq Abdullah’s dramatic dismissal as CM throws J&K into acute political instability.” India Today, 1984. Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/19840731-farooq->

abdullahs-dramatic-dismissal-as-cm-throws-j-k-into-acute-political-
instability-803189-1984-07-30

*Chawla, Prabhu. "Farooq Abdullah's dramatic dismissal as CM throws
J&K into acute political instability." India Today, 1984. Available at:
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farooqabdullahs-dramatic-dismissal-as-cm-throws-j-k-into-acute-political-
instability-803189-1984-07-30](https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/19840731-farooqabdullahs-dramatic-dismissal-as-cm-throws-j-k-into-acute-political-instability-803189-1984-07-30)

Chapter

13

A few weeks after Shah took over, Indira Gandhi visited Srinagar. After the meeting, she told Shah she wanted to go out shopping. “It’s Sunday, Madam,” Shah pointed out, “markets are closed.” She smiled at him. “Not all markets are closed today,” she replied and mentioned a specific market. The Chief Minister checked with officials. The downtown market was indeed open.

Shah escorted Indira Gandhi towards the market. She stopped the car at a particular shop on the Boulevard along the Dal Lake and entered it. The shopkeeper rushed to greet her. She knew all about him and his family. They chatted for a while before Indira Gandhi crossed the road and pointed to the newly built Centaur Hotel at the edge of the lake.

“We don’t care for our natural resources,” she said to Shah, “The Dal is so beautiful . . . we should preserve it, protect its environment. You were the Works Minister when Sheikh sahib allowed this encroachment on the Dal. Why didn’t you stop it?” she asked in a soft voice.

“I was stumped,” Shah admitted later, “first she displayed her local knowledge and her personal relationship with common Kashmiris; and then she made me hang my head by sweetly asking me why I hadn’t done my duty as a minister! She knew how to intimidate people by her simple actions and words.”

Shah was smitten, personally and politically. He had opposed the Congress throughout his long political career. Indira Gandhi had also sided with

Farooq in the run up to the Sheikh's succession. He was convinced that she was personally against him. But, when the wheel turned, she put aside her reservations and fulfilled his lifetime ambition to be CM. Shah was obliged.

Of course, she turned to him after she became disenchanted with Farooq. The turnaround though, was a small detail for him. Her support at a critical juncture was the big thing in his mind. He burst out into a popular Hindi film song to express his feelings at a public rally in Jammu, "Sau saal pehle humhe tumse pyaar tha, aaj bhi hai aur kal bhi rahega (I was in love with you a hundred years ago . . . I love you now and will love you tomorrow too)."

Unfortunately for Shah, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her bodyguards on October 31, 1984. Rajiv Gandhi became the Prime Minister and announced elections to Parliament at the end of the year. The Congress was re-elected at the Centre with a historic majority. The vote trend made it obvious that the majority population voted en bloc for the Congress.

The verdict did not go the Congress way in J&K. Its ally, National Conference (Khalida), with Shah as the CM, came out a cropper. National Conference (Farooq) pocketed all three seats in the Valley. Congress won the two Jammu seats. The outcome left Shah red-faced, more so because his son Muzaffar, the strategist in engineering defections from the Farooq camp, was defeated in Srinagar by a Farooq nominee with a huge margin of over two lakh votes. Farooq's mother, Begum Akbar Jahan, who was persuaded to contest from Anantnag constituency, also won with a comfortable margin over her Congress rival.

The results undermined the political legitimacy of Shah. Peoples' verdict made it clear that the mandate was with Farooq and the political wrangling by his family members in collusion with the Congress had failed to subtract from his political appeal.

The drubbing that Muzaffar Shah received was particularly painful for Shah and his wife. They were grooming him as a political heir in the run-up to the permanent ouster of Uncle Farooq. Muzaffar was specifically nominated from Srinagar because the seat was held by the former Chief Minister. Shah

and Khalida campaigned extensively for him, but their best laid plans fell flat.

The election results put a question mark on Shah. A section of the Congress leadership in the State was of the view that he was unable to pull his own weight. Farooq was, therefore, the only long-term bet in Kashmir.

The Congress responded to the electoral embarrassment by asking Shah to pull out the White Paper it had prepared on the 'misdoings of the Farooq Abdullah government'. Shah was hesitant because the preparation of the White Paper had provoked its own politics within the State. A section of the bureaucracy and political leadership opposed the compilation of such a Paper. They argued it would divide the bureaucracy into pro and anti-Farooq factions, and also expose the officials to public ire. Shah agreed with the view.

But the Centre was insistent. The Chief Minister and the Governor were summoned to Delhi to meet the Prime Minister and the Home Minister on the issue. They were told to release the report to up the offensive against Farooq.

Deputy Chief Minister D.D. Thakur released the 133-page document that indicted the Farooq government for revoking the detention of 31 alleged anti-national activists on purely technical grounds. It said their detention orders were not confirmed by the advisory boards within the stipulated time because the district authorities did not put up the cases for confirmation.

"Circumstances suggest that Dr. Farooq Abdullah and his government encouraged the anti-national elements by conniving at their activities, and as a result, a serious threat to the security and integrity of the nation has been posed," the report noted. "If the members of the Assembly belonging to the National Conference had not realized the threat and had not withdrawn their support from the Government headed by Dr Farooq Abdullah, a very grave situation would have arisen," it concluded in a self-congratulatory tone. The Paper made only cursory references to a helicopter and a truck deal while dealing with the cases of corruption against the Farooq Abdullah government. It had vetted 4,000 government files to do so.*

The focus, it was apparent, was to paint Farooq as an anti-national. AICC General Secretary Srikant Verma strengthened the belief when he commented that the White Paper 'had vindicated their earlier stand that the Farooq Government was hobnobbing with anti-national elements'.

Farooq treated the allegation with disdain. "I am prepared to face the gallows if any of the charges are proved in court. The people of Kashmir have already given a verdict on their baseless insinuations."

The much-touted White Paper made no impact in Kashmir. It came and went like an early morning mist.

Farooq was undeterred by the insinuations and continued to seek out Rajiv Gandhi. He had started his quest immediately after Mrs Gandhi's assassination. He was the first opposition leader to appeal to people to rally behind Rajiv. He repeated it again after the Lok Sabha polls. Later, he said in an interview, "I cannot be ridiculed for my desire to raise additional bridges between Srinagar and Delhi. I do not believe in double standards. I am for friendship with Delhi. And I cannot shut my eyes to the victory of the Congress elsewhere in the country. Rajiv," he emphasized, "has to be assisted by everyone in his attempts at providing better socio-economic conditions."

The strategy succeeded. In February 1985, the two met for three quarters of an hour amidst a session of Parliament and the visit of Argentinian President Raul Alfonsin. Rajiv insisted that Farooq should shun contact with anti-national elements in the Valley. Farooq pleaded innocence and sought the dismissal of the 'usurper' Shah government followed by fresh elections. Although the discussion was tentative, the ice was broken.

Shah sensed the winds of change and reacted quickly to the meeting. "I am prepared to reunite with Farooq's National Conference if he accepts total and permanent friendship with the Congress and does not claim the chief ministership of the State." He said he would resign if his entire Cabinet was accommodated in the next government.

Shah and Deputy Chief Minister Thakur rushed to Delhi to present their case before Rajiv Gandhi and other important Congress leaders. They

emphasized on the dangers involved in the rehabilitation of Farooq in the Valley and wished that administrative action against the former CM should be initiated at the earliest. Thakur sent copies of the White Paper to the Union Home Minister and the Attorney General of India for opinion on the feasibility of registering a case of sedition and treason against Farooq Abdullah. "There is plenty of evidence of the positive encouragement Dr Abdullah and his followers gave to anti-national and secessionist forces," he said. "It includes both Islamic pro Pakistan elements and Sikh extremists," he added.

Shah's problems were not only political. They were administrative too, and precisely the same as he had called out Farooq for. Governor Jagmohan was so frustrated with Shah's style of functioning that he camped in Delhi for a fortnight to meet PM Rajiv Gandhi and President Zail Singh to present his negative view on the State government. Jagmohan gave the Centre a list of over a dozen cases of corruption and maladministration against the Shah government.

The list included the unconditional release of pro-Pakistan and secessionist elements from jail; the abolition of regional recruitment boards and the appointment of relatives of ministers in government jobs; recruitment of known communal elements in government service; the decision to sell Nazul and leasehold land to occupants at half the market value; authorizing Cabinet ministers to settle revenue and tax arrears by negotiating directly with tax-payers; and the appointment of a person with serious corruption charges against him as chairman of the Jammu & Kashmir Bank.

Shah, Jagmohan said, announced the release of Syed Ali Shah Gilani, arrested under the Public Safety Act, on the eve of elections to Parliament. Gilani then went on to address public meetings at which he made pro-Pakistan speeches, inciting the people to launch an Iran-type revolution in the State. Thakur, however, rebuffed the allegation and said Geelani was in a bad state of health, and if he had died in jail, it would have had repercussions across the State. Jagmohan pointed out that Gilani had addressed over 100 meetings after recovering miraculously within hours of his release.

The appointment of S.M. Din, managing director of the State Financial Corporation, as chairman of the Jammu & Kashmir Bank Ltd was another contentious issue. There were criminal charges pending against him for his role in granting loans to politicians like Moulvi Iftikhar Ansari, the Congress legislature party leader, and G.M. Shah's son, Muzaffar Shah, while he was the general manager of the bank. The State government's decision to authorize Thakur to negotiate settlement of tax arrears of businessmen, which were estimated to be over Rs 30 crores, was again in flagrant violation of established rules.

Kashmiri Pandit organizations in the Valley were unhappy with the State's admission and recruitment policies. They alleged that the pandits were being forced to leave the State under 'a deliberately drawn-out plan'. Students, they alleged, were denied admission to educational institutions on communal grounds. Frustrated young men had set fire to the State Employment Office in Srinagar to vent their ire.

Jagmohan made a powerful case against the Shah government, and Rajiv Gandhi, at one point, considered Shah's dismissal. A bit of dinner diplomacy, with an eight-course lavish Kashmiri spread, however, held Rajiv's hand for a while. He probably wanted the Congress to form its own government with outside support, either from Farooq Abdullah or from Shah's MLAs. But the option was still premature. Shah got a reprieve.

Shah celebrated his one-year anniversary of being a CM with fanfare, undaunted by the fact that the day, July 2, witnessed a total closure in Kashmir in protest against his policies. The opposition-sponsored bandh crippled life in the Valley and, except for government vehicles and policemen in riot gear, no one stepped out to 'celebrate' Shah's stewardship of the State. An eerie silence hung all around as ministers and officials congratulated each other on the 'achievements' of the government. It was the tenth shut down in the State in as many months.

It was obvious that Shah had failed to deliver a stable and effective government, and though the Congress tried to retrieve whatever it could from a steadily declining situation, it couldn't really do much about it. Farooq Abdullah had again gained credibility. Any comparison with the Shah leadership made him stand out like a lustrous example.

Congress leaders and workers were restive too. A convention of Congress workers, held in the Valley in June, heard speaker after speaker vent its ire against Shah's ineptitude. Arun Nehru was consequently dispatched to Srinagar by Rajiv Gandhi to make an assessment of the situation. He advised Shah to consult the Congress before taking any policy decisions. A 12-member coordination committee was formed. It included members from both the parties. Congress, it became obvious, wanted to run the government without directly participating in it.

A section of the Congress central leadership favoured a rapprochement with Farooq Abdullah. Half a dozen inconclusive meetings had already been held either with Farooq or with his nominees. The Congress proposed it would withdraw support from Shah and clear the way for Farooq to become interim CM until Assembly elections were to be held. Farooq declined the offer.

"My top priority is to get this defectors' government out of office. And how can I agree to yet another defector forming a government? Let there be a spell of Governor's rule followed by Assembly elections. We should follow well-established democratic norms," he said. The Congress dithered on implementing the principle. Farooq became restive. He was keen for the Centre to dismiss Shah as soon as possible. He adopted an aggressive posture to force its hand. "If they continuously go on denying democracy to the people of this State, I am afraid it would lead to a Punjab-like situation (of insurgency). Then there will be no turning point, I fear."

The warning rushed Shah into seeking a rapprochement with his estranged brother-in-law once again. Friends of the two families were galvanized into action to find a common meeting ground for them. Farooq shot down the efforts immediately. "I will not pray at his (Shah's) grave even when he is dead. They should not think we are weak. We can make their life miserable."*

Farooq's inflexible stand on Shah caused the Congress to go into a huddle. It was clear that in backing Shah the party had landed itself in an embarrassing situation. He had become an albatross around its neck, and there seemed to be no way to get rid of it without causing more damage to itself. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi summoned all 26 MLAs of the party to

Delhi, and discussed the options with them on a one-to-one basis. The discussions led nowhere; status quo continued.

State Congress Chief Mufti Mohammad Sayeed also consulted with local party men, but they were caught in the cleft of multiple options. The options were: Governor's Rule for a temporary period and keeping the Assembly under suspended animation; installation of a Congress government by encouraging defections from both the factions of the National Conference; installation of a Congress government with unconditional support from outside by Farooq Abdullah's party, and dissolution of the State Assembly followed by fresh elections.

None of the State leaders favoured the last option, but they supported the idea of a temporary spell of Governor's rule. The Central leadership vetoed the idea. It said it would be conceding exactly what Farooq demanded! Moreover, there was a real and clear danger of Shah crossing over to his brother-in-law in panic.

Communal riots broke out in the State on February 20, 1986. Trouble began when a small group of Hindu fundamentalists in Jammu staged a victory march over the unlocking of Ram Janmabhoomi in Ayodhya on February 1. Some Muslims were allegedly assaulted by the marchers. In retaliation, Muslims in Anantnag attacked and desecrated 42 Hindu temples. Temples in Srinagar were also attacked and the Kashmiri Pandit community was targeted by the rioters. Shah couldn't do much about the situation, given his unpopularity among the people. Governor Jagmohan stepped in and sought out Farooq Abdullah and Mirwaiz Farooq. They reached out to the population, provided support to effected Hindus in the Valley and restored calm. The riots, Shah's irrelevance, and the pro-active role of the Governor in restoring order convinced Congress strategists that the elected government had crumbled to dust.

"The end, when it came," wrote India Today, "was completely in character, not a swift, clean termination like the scything of a rice stalk but a reluctant, lingering demise more like that of an over-ripe Kashmiri plum finally falling, decaying and malodorous, to the ground. Like most things political, there was more than an air of the theatre and a touch of the farce to the demise of the State government in Jammu & Kashmir."

The report also said, “Here was Chief Minister Ghulam Mohammad Shah demurring on March 6 at urgent summons from Governor Jagmohan in Jammu, pleading on the long-distance line from Delhi that he hadn’t got a ticket on the morning flight. Two weeks after communal riots swept the Kashmir Valley, the Congress (I) had withdrawn its support of the Shah Administration, and he knew what the summons were all about. When a special aircraft was laid on for him the next day, Shah decided he wanted first to go home to lunch before stopping by at Raj Bhawan.”

Shah’s lunch menu was a contorted last-minute cook-up. It announced the dissolution of National Conference (Khalida) and its unilateral merger with National Conference (Farooq). Six of the 10 ministers present at the lunch reacted sharply to Shah’s decision. They decided not to go with Farooq’s NC, and, after the rest were spurned by NC, the 14 ministers decided to form a separate bloc. Shah and Khalida were left alone.

On the night of March 6, after prolonged consultations to see if any other arrangement could be worked out, the Congress leadership directed Mufti Sayeed to withdraw support. Moulvi Iftikhar Hussain Ansari, leader of the party’s legislature wing, sent the official letter to Jagmohan late in the night. “Shah couldn’t manage it, he couldn’t manage the party or the law and order situation,” Mufti commented laconically.

On the afternoon of March 7, 1986, unwilling to await Shah’s pleasure any longer, Jagmohan signed a four-line dismissal letter, suspended the Assembly and issued a proclamation for Governor’s rule.

Shah was unaware of the developments. He boarded his car in a sullen mood to go to the Raj Bhawan to hand over his resignation letter, and the NC (K) resolution dissolving his party to the Governor. Jagmohan’s emissary carrying the dismissal letter, and Shah, with his resignation letter, crossed each other on Jammu’s main thoroughfare. Shah later claimed he was not dismissed, he had resigned. Jagmohan reiterated Shah was dismissed after 20 months of a rule full of unrest—curfew was imposed on 157 of the 600 days Shah was in power—and political uncertainty.

Shah was best described by a political observer as ‘a captive Chief Minister—captive to a set of circumstances he himself created in July 1984. It was

history taking revenge.'

*Chawla, Prabhu. "Public discard 'White Paper' on Farooq govt's alleged objectionable activities." India Today, 1985. Available at:
<https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19850131-public-discard-white-paper-on-farooq-govts-alleged-objectionable-activities-769728-2013-11-24>

*Chawla, Prabhu. "Congress(I) reviews its decision supporting Ghulam Mohammed Shah govt in J&K." India Today, 1985 Available at:
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Chapter

14

“Kashmir remains,” Rone Tempest quoted journalist M.J Akbar in The Los Angeles Times on October 19, 1986, “the laboratory of secular and democratic India. The idea of India will succeed or fail in this Muslim-majority State.”

“Kashmiri leaders,” the article said, “have become adept at exploiting Indian fears of losing Kashmir while stoking Pakistan’s territorial lust. The Mirwaiz Moulvi Farooq, a powerful religious and political leader in Srinagar, observed in a recent interview: ‘Kashmir is a sensitive border State with a very much awakened population. Sometimes they blackmail India. Sometimes they blackmail Pakistan. Sometimes they blackmail Islam.’ Farooq Abdullah, leader of the National Conference, a political party, agreed with him.”

“Frankly,” he confessed to L.A. Times, “we use the Pakistan thing to get a little bit more for Kashmir. We go to New Delhi and tell them the people are talking about Pakistan and they give us what we want.”

The most important development in those incidents (February riots), the article went on to say, was the emergence of a charismatic Muslim fundamentalist leader, Qazi Nissar, the Mirwaiz of South Kashmir. He adopted tactics that emboldened the fundamentalists. For one thing, he attacked the Indian government’s population control programme. He said it was a ‘deep-rooted conspiracy to destroy the majority Muslim character of the State’. Muslims should not practise birth control. “I will reward Muslim

parents who have more than seven children with a cash prize of 21,000 rupees, or \$1,600,” he said.

Nissar also campaigned for slaughter of cattle for beef in Kashmir. It was a clear political provocation directed at the Hindus for whom the cow is a sacred animal. His last act before his arrest came on August 27. A minor State official, the article noted, the Director of Food and Supplies Department, ordered Kashmiris not to slaughter any animals on that day, as it was the birthday of the Hindu god Krishna. Nissar defied the order and slaughtered three sheep himself and took the meat to local markets where he demanded that it be sold.

Violence, however, erupted in Srinagar—Anantnag and Baramulla—on September 19 when Mirwaiz Moulvi Farooq made a speech outside the main Srinagar Mosque. In the police action, one person was killed, another died in Baramulla.

L.A. Times reported that the demonstrations and violence were marked by pro-Pakistan slogans, Pakistani flags and display of large pictures of the late Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. “Again, the Kashmir tug-of-war was beginning,” it noted with a sense of déjà vu.

“Whether one likes it or not,” journalist M.L. Kotru wrote in The Statesman newspaper, “the fact has to be recorded that Kashmir’s links with India are under severe strain.” Kotru’s words were mild as compared to the sentiment on the streets. A vigorously pro-Pakistan mood prevailed throughout the Valley. A large part of it was instigated by the happenings in Ayodhya. India, the maulvis told Friday gatherings, was a threat to Islam. They raised the war cry of Allah-hu-Akbar to exhort believers to rush to the aid of their religion—Islam khatre mein hai, hoshiyar ho jao (Beware, Islam is in danger).

Pro-Pakistan elements in Kashmir invariably surfaced during times of political uncertainty. The removal of Chief Minister Shah, suspension of the State Assembly and imposition of Governor’s rule had left a leadership void in Kashmir. State political parties exploited the uncertainty for their own narrow ends. They encouraged demonstrations in which pro-Pak slogans and calls to save Islam were raised.

“Those boys don’t really mean they are pro-Pakistan,” Farooq Abdullah said. “They just know what they have to say to get noticed in New Delhi.”

The situation was not as simple as Farooq presented it for the benefit of the L.A. Times correspondent. The governments of Farooq Abdullah and his successor G.M. Shah were instrumental in keeping the lid on the underground spread of Islamic fundamentalist elements, typified by the Jamaat-e-Islami, and the support they received from Pakistan. They helped or ignored them to meet the exigencies of their political interests.

Moreover, gross misgovernance, unbridled corruption, unemployment, sky-rocketing cost of living, political uncertainty and the continuous harangue on ‘step-motherly treatment of Kashmir by India’ since Sheikh Abdullah returned to power in 1975, had undermined the confidence of the people in the system. The only throwback memories that the masses had were of the Lion of Kashmir. He was a giant, who was succeeded by pygmy leaders. But even his memory was inadvertently shattered by his own family.

Farooq was under heavy public criticism during his tenure as Chief Minister in 1984. He desperately needed the people’s goodwill. He, therefore, came up with the idea of reviving memories of the Sheikh as the Lion of Kashmir. The emotional fall-out, he reasoned, would buoy his own standing in the Valley since he was perceived as the Sheikh’s ‘natural successor’ during his lifetime.

A Hollywood movie *The Lion of the Desert*, starring Anthony Quinn, was pending release in India. The film was based on the life of Bedouin leader Omar Mukhtar, who had waged a relentless guerrilla war against the Italian forces of Mussolini in Libya from 1911 to 1931. He was later captured and hanged.

“We’ll never surrender, we’ll win or die. You’ve to fight the next generation and the next; and, I will live longer than my hang man,” the Lion of the Desert roared in the climax of the film.

Farooq was inspired by the film. He was sure it would trigger a strong pro-Sheikh sentiment and an anti-India emotion in the Valley. The latter would check-mate Centre’s plans to oust him from power. His advisors, however,

warned him against the release of the film in Kashmir. It would, they argued, cause an unnecessary comparison between the two Lions, and perhaps, cause more disaffection among the people. Farooq ignored the advice.

The film opened to houseful shows in Srinagar's Regal cinemas in January 1984. Even though an overwhelming majority of the people could not fully comprehend the film's English dialogues, they were overwhelmed by the selfless honesty, integrity and commitment of Omar Mukhtar to his cause. The comparison between Sheikh Abdullah and his agreement with Mrs Gandhi to capture power stoked anger amongst the people. The nickel dropped while they watched the film—they had been betrayed by their leader in their quest for azadi.

Frenzied young men rushed out of the film show and headed towards Mujahid Manzil, the office of the National Conference. They threw stones and tore up life-size posters of the Sheikh. Not satisfied with the vandalism, they purchased posters of the Sheikh and tore or burnt them up with a vengeance. They were angry that they were tricked by the Sheikh; and frustrated because it took them so long to realize it. The film rallied young men against Sheikh Abdullah's brand of politics. It ground to dust whatever little that remained of the goodwill and affection for the Lion of Kashmir among the masses.

It also motivated them to take things in their own hands. Yasin Malik, who later headed the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, was one such person. He was a student, and the day he saw the film was etched forever in his memory. "I and many other Kashmiri youth were inspired by the film and Omar Mukhtar. We realized Sheikh Abdullah and his family were not interested in Kashmiri aspirations. They were only interested in their own power and pelf. A lot of youth, including myself, started to gravitate towards militancy after watching The Lion of the Desert."

The film ignited the fuse of rebellion among the youth. An armed struggle, because of the failure of political leadership, was the only alternative if they were to secure the right of self-determination of the people of Kashmir. They were encouraged in their pursuit by the Jamaat and the JKLF. Young

men crossed over to Pakistan Occupied Kashmir to receive arms training. It started as a trickle, but soon turned into a flood.

Agitation on the streets notwithstanding, imposition of Governor's rule was welcomed by common people. "My first priority," Jagmohan announced, "is to bring about communal harmony and confidence among the minorities. We have to reform and reorganize the administration to give it a humane and enlightened face, to make it more progressive. We will concentrate on development and the environment."

Jagmohan had six months, the duration to which the Rule could last under Constitutional provisions, to put the State back on the rails. He, therefore, organized the administrative set up with special emphasis on resolving peoples' grievances regarding employment, and law and order. He also phased out curfew that was in place after riots of February 20, 1986.

The suspended status of the State Assembly had, in the meanwhile, activated political groups. There was speculation that Congress would poach legislators from the NC to form a government in J&K. Farooq, on his part, talked to everyone, but took his own stance. "I've learnt to differentiate between friends, opportunists and enemies," he said. He wished to have no truck with Shah and his band of defectors, or with the agent provocateur in the defection game, the Congress. He wanted elections as soon as possible so that he could once again prove his majority.

Farooq moved his pieces on the Kashmir chess board adroitly. He had railed against Governor Jagmohan when he swore in Shah. He now wanted the Governor to sort out the mess created by him and his brother-in-law so that he could start with a clean slate once again.

"Governor's rule is meant to be unpopular," he declared. "He is sitting in a seat where he will have to take unpopular decisions to straighten up the State. I'm saying he should go ahead because I'm the man who will have to face the people tomorrow and tell them why this was done. You can't straighten up a state by putting sweets in everybody's mouths." It was obvious that Farooq wanted Jagmohan to be on his side in the forthcoming game of thrones. The goodwill he earned with the previous Governor B.K. Nehru had stood him in good stead.

Farooq was also clear in his messaging to Rajiv Gandhi. Indira Gandhi may have had an opinion about him because of ‘an atmosphere of mistrust, basically a loss of communication’, but with Rajiv in command at the Centre, there was no scope for a mess up. “This time I’m going to make sure that the communication will remain with the Centre,” he declared earnestly in an interview with The Week magazine. “I will not wait but personally go there to explain, to clarify the situation rather than allow it to drift. One learns from experience.” Farooq’s statements hit the right buttons in New Delhi.

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was keen to bring peace to trouble-torn states in the country. Whether it was Punjab, Assam, Mizoram or Kashmir; Rajiv was willing to walk the extra mile to accommodate the aspirations of regional players even at the expense of the political interests of his party. Moreover, he knew Farooq and his family well, and thought of him as a well-meaning person with national interests in his heart. Farooq, like him, joined politics because of family compulsions. He had, of course, erred in the past because of his exuberance, but Rajiv was convinced about his honest intentions.

Rajiv’s cousin and powerful minister, Arun Nehru, disagreed with the opinion. Old guard M.L. Fotedar, once Mrs Gandhi’s closest aide, seconded Nehru’s view. Both the Kashmiris were dropped from discussions on Kashmir.

Mufti Mohammad Sayeed as party chief in J&K posed a problem, but he was under a cloud because of his alleged role in the communal violence in Anantnag in February, 1986. It was said that he signalled his supporters to start the riot in order to discredit G.M. Shah’s government and cause its fall for the sake of his ambition to be the Chief Minister.

Rajiv was upset with the Mufti’s politicking to undermine a Congress-supported government, but he could not jettison him right away. He instead moved him from his PCC role to the Rajya Sabha as a nominated member, and made him the Union Tourism Minister. The move killed two birds with one stone—Mufti was no more involved in day-to-day affairs of the State unit, and it satisfied Farooq Abdullah who wanted to have no truck with him during his parleys with the Congress.

Rajesh Pilot, a new MP and Union Minister for Surface Transport, was a go-getter. Rajesh Prasad was once a pilot in the Indian Air Force. He dropped his surname Prasad and added Pilot to it in order to identify himself more closely with the Gandhi family's love for flying. Rajesh had an infectious laugh and an astute sense of discretion. Mrs Gandhi trusted him with several sensitive assignments and he had always delivered. He was a regular fixture at 10, Safdarjung Lane, Mrs Gandhi's residence. Farooq struck an easy friendship with Pilot and made him one of the main emissaries between himself and Rajiv Gandhi. (Pilot's son Sachin fell in love and later married Farooq's daughter Sara).

Several rounds of highly secret parleys with Farooq convinced Rajiv that he could trust him to end the impasse in Kashmir. Farooq was the man who shared his vision of a happy and prosperous Kashmir fully integrated with the Indian body politic. Rajiv took the plunge.

Rumours on the likelihood of an accord abounded in the weeks preceding it. They unsettled leaders in the Congress and the National Conference. The cadres of the two parties were both curious about its contours as well as fearful of what might be actually handed down to them by their leaders. Except for a very few, no consultations were held with anyone. Rajiv and Farooq, it was said, had quietly drawn a vision for a rejuvenated and purposeful Kashmir. It made them apprehensive.

In November 1986, Rajiv and Farooq signed a 'historic' accord that reinstated Farooq as Chief Minister. It also proposed a roadmap for stabilizing the State. The turn of events, ironically, bore a striking resemblance to the 'historic' Indira Gandhi-Sheikh Abdullah Agreement of 1975 wherein he was reinstalled as the CM. The Sheikh too had promised to stabilize Kashmir.

Farooq took the oath of office as Chief Minister alone because the ministry of the coalition government was still in the making. Regional leaders of both the parties lobbied hard to secure a berth in the new ministry. Several lists were drawn up and revised when Farooq strongly objected to some of the Congress inclusions. Ghulam Rasool Kar was one such name. Rajesh Pilot conveyed to Farooq the Centre favoured his inclusion in the new ministry. The new Chief Minister, however, viewed Kar as a master of

intrigue; as someone who could upset his apperance at the first available opportunity. He crossed out Kar from the list.

After consultations in Srinagar with Governor Jagmohan and others, Rajesh Pilot flew on his last and final mission to Delhi. He returned in the afternoon—the swearing in was scheduled at 4.15 p.m. on November 7—and shared the list with Farooq. Interestingly, apart from some general talk about the ministry, Farooq had not shared the NC list with the Congress.

At 5.15 p.m., the names were officially out. Mufti Mohammad Sayeed was so incensed with the choices that he walked out of Raj Bhawan in a huff and did not return for the swearing in. Kar, too, stomped off angrily.

To rub it in further, Farooq not only excluded his *bête noire* Kar, who was the kingpin in the Mufti group, but included Mir Lasjan from the rival Congress faction. Mir was the Pradesh Congress Committee vice president and was neither an MLA nor an MLC. He had written a lengthy confidential memorandum to the Prime Minister outlining corruption charges against Mufti. Farooq handed over the charge of the Civil Supplies and Transport departments, which were strongholds of the Mufti group, to Mir.

Farooq also tossed out heavyweights of his own party. P.L. Handoo, Mohammad Shafi, Abdul Rahim Rather, Bashir Kitchlew, and party General Secretary Sheikh Nazir were denied ministerial berths. Instead, newcomers like R.S. Chib and Abdul Salam Deva were brought in. Chib's inclusion was significant. He was a former wing commander in the Indian Air Force, who had worked hard to obliterate the pro-Pak image that NC had in the Hindu-dominated Jammu region.

Farooq's 'masterstroke' provoked an immediate backlash. Disgruntled Congressmen and NC leaders got together, and decided to bring a motion calling for a week-long session of the Assembly. The dissidents planned to use the time to gather enough support in the Assembly to table a no-confidence motion against the new government and effectively sink the Rajiv-Farooq accord. The move would, however, ensure the continuance of the House with another dissident-led government in power.

The move was initiated as soon as the first Cabinet meeting was officially convened in the presence of Governor Jagmohan. The meeting was planned as an informal affair, but one of the new Congress ministers, Master Beli Ram, suddenly proposed that the Assembly should be summoned into session for at least a week. The proposal unsettled Farooq. He recovered quickly and whispered into the Governor's ear that if the Assembly wasn't dissolved forthwith, the new accord was over.

Jagmohan understood the import of Beli Ram's move and Farooq's nervousness about it. He immediately announced the dissolution of the State Assembly. "The Chief Minister has advised me to do so," he said, "and I have accepted his advice." Fresh elections would be held within six months; Farooq would be caretaker Chief Minister till then.

Farooq heaved a sigh of relief. He had come within a hair's breadth from being ousted from power once again.

Though the Rajiv-Farooq Accord was ostensibly designed to ensure full integration of Kashmir into the Indian political mainstream, the ground situation was stacked against it. The Opposition called it an unprincipled alliance between two power hungry groups. Many NC leaders were also unhappy with Farooq. They were sure he succumbed to pressure from New Delhi and surrendered NC seats to its rival.

The Accord carved out the 76 seats in the Assembly between the two parties as per its own permutations and combinations. The lion's share of seats went to NC. It was allotted 45 seats, including 8 in Jammu and 1 in Leh. The Congress, on the other hand, was given 36 seats, inclusive of 7 in the Valley. It dropped 12 of its 26 sitting MLAs from the final list of candidates. Moulvi Iftikhar Ansari, the veteran party leader, was among the prominent names that was deleted from the list.

Alongside, the Mufti's group was completely side-lined in the election process. He was not consulted on the potential candidates for the polls. However, Ghulam Rasool Kar was elevated to the PCC and had to go through the process of pledging loyalty to the accord in a private meeting with Rajiv Gandhi.

Farooq was in complete control. He had already convinced Rajiv to entrust him with drawing up the Congress' election strategy. Farooq, therefore, approved Kar's appointment before it was announced. He also pushed for, or vetoed Congress candidates when their names were given to him by the party. The four-member coordination committee of the two parties, set up to oversee the electoral implementation of the Accord, was totally ignored by him. He dictated his terms to Congress leaders and they accepted them without a murmur.

It was clear to the Congress men that both the NC and the Congress were now the personal fiefdom of Farooq Abdullah. It caused widespread dissatisfaction amongst the Congress cadre. Many joined the NC camp; the rest extended their support to the recently formed Muslim United Front.

Voters were palpably angry with the tie-up, too. They termed it as a deception and a ruse to gain power by Farooq. "Sheikh Abdullah fought against Hindustan but his son has offered Kashmir on a platter to the country. It is a betrayal," People Conference leader Abdul Gani Lone thundered at public meetings. "Vote for anyone but not for either the Congress or the NC."

The 'anyone' was fast emerging on the scenario. It was a coalition of Islamic groups—the Jamaat-e-Islami, Ummat-e-Islam, and the Mahaaz-e-Azadi—which had come together as Muslim United Front (MUF). It gained traction within days of its formation, and during the run up to the poll, as many as 40 of its candidates hoisted green flags with Quranic verses embossed on them at their public meetings. In 30 seats of Sopore, Bandipora and Handwara districts, their rousing cry was 'Awah, awah, awah inquilab (the revolution is coming)', and 'Assembly me kya chalega? Nizam-e-Mustafa (What will work in Assembly? The law of the Quran)'.

The Accord, they said, was a secular challenge to Quranic principles and a total sell-out by Sheikh Abdullah's family to leaders of 'Hindustan'. MUF candidate, Ali Shah Geelani, who was jailed earlier on charges of secession, raised the battle cry of Allah-hu-Akbar before beginning his public rallies. Appeals issued by secessionists to defeat the Accord and to usher in governance based on Islamic principles added heat to the already boiling political pot.

Farooq was unflustered by the charges of a sell-out. He campaigned relentlessly amidst the March rain, sunshine and thunder. NC supporters greeted him with roars of 'sher awah, sher awah' (the lion has come) as he lumbered across the Valley in his white Maruti Gypsy. He harped on how the Accord would bring peace and development to the State, and spoke with fervour against fundamentalism and in favour of secular politics. Islam is not in danger. The real danger is from poverty, he said emphatically.

Elections were held on March 23, 1987. The Congress was plagued with dissident-activity which aimed at ensuring the party's rout and a quick demise of the Accord. Mufti was the main architect of this electoral sabotage. His role in rioting in Anantnag was a forerunner of his deepening ties with Muslim groups, and though he campaigned for the Congress, he made it clear through a pantomime that his support was for the newly sprung MUF.

He underlined his preference in an ingenious way. MUF's election symbol was an inkpot with a pen in it. The Mufti urged people to vote for the Congress, but he simultaneously took out his pen and gestured towards MUF symbol. He then stroked an imaginary beard around his chin. The message was not lost on people.

The MUF found public support across Kashmir Valley because of Farooq's lackadaisical administration and the Congress' eroded credibility. All Islamic groups in the vale also lent full support to it. It was, perhaps, the first and the last attempt of Muslim activists to come to power through the democratic process. MUF's popularity indicated that it was set for an impressive electoral debut.

Voting day trends confirmed MUF's broad base in the Valley. The threat to Farooq was clear—if a dozen or so seats swung away from him, his days as Chief Minister were over. Farooq mulled over the possibility and reacted with large-scale arrests of MUF leaders as soon as the voting ended. He labelled them 'anti-nationals'. Most parts of the Valley were also placed under curfew. Counting at many polling stations was delayed—at some places by four to five days. There were also widespread allegations of rigging and poll fraud.

MUF leader Muhammad Yusuf Shah's NC rival was routed in the contest. "He leaves the counting center in a visibly dejected mood and goes home. But he is summoned back—to be declared the winner by presiding officials."

Mohammad Yusuf Shah later became Syed Salahuddin and rose to head the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen. His election manager, Yasin Malik, headed the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front. The duo was responsible for much of the murder and mayhem in Kashmir in the years to come.

The clampdown and vote manipulation left no one in doubt that the verdict was snatched away by the government. Even key government players admitted to the massive poll fraud perpetuated on the electorate. Though Farooq initially denied the allegations of rigging, he later accepted them but pointed the finger away from him. With his characteristic aplomb, he blamed the Centre. "I am not saying the elections weren't rigged," Farooq said to India Today, "but I didn't rig them."

Farooq came to power, but the elections skidded the Valley into an armed Islamic revival and import of terrorism from Pakistan.

Chapter

15

Terrorism announced its arrival in Kashmir with a big bang on July 31, 1988. A group of four young JKLF leaders—Ishfaq Majeed Wani, Sheikh Abdul Hamid, Mohammad Yasin Malik and Javid Ahmed Mir, popularly known as HAJY—planted bombs at the Golf Course and Telegraph Office, Srinagar.

“These bombs were planted with an intention to give a loud and clear message to Government of India that Kashmiri youth is ready to face them. These bombs were not planted to harm anyone, but to jolt the administration and attract the attention of the international community towards Kashmir and our demands,” Javid Ahmed Mir said in a statement. The HAJY foursome had earlier set up Tallah Party in 1980, and converted it into Islamic Students League (ISL) in 1984.

ISL leaders supported the MUF during the election in 1987. The Farooq Abdullah government cracked down on their activists, put them behind bars and gave them the third-degree treatment. “We were forced by the political establishment to cross over to POK and pick up the gun,” said Javid Mir. “The Indian system had no place for people who wanted to air their grievances. It was either the Abdullah family or the Mufti group which held all the cards. There was no scope for anyone else. They used the police . . . the mother of Sheikh Abdul Hamid was dragged out of her house at midnight and detained. We were booked under the Public Safety Act and tortured in detention centres. We were forced to believe that non-violent movement is not an option for us,” he concluded with passionate intensity.

However, the statement was only a small part of a long story of wilful radicalization and invited involvement of Pakistan in Kashmir's body politic. It went back to the early years of 1950s decade when the process of formulation of the J&K constitution began. Sheikh Abdullah implemented only parts of the agreement he had arrived at with Jawaharlal Nehru—the parts which suited his purpose of strengthening his stranglehold over Kashmir. Nehru was bitterly disappointed. He wrote to Sheikh on June 28, 1953: "To me it has been a major surprise that the settlement arrived at should be bypassed or repudiated. That strikes at the root of all confidence. My honour is to be bound up with my word."

Earlier, Sheikh Abdullah, in a speech on July 13, 1952, at Mazar-e-Shoda in Srinagar, had clearly said that the accession of the State was not irrevocable. "Kashmir is not a Hindu bride who cannot be remarried," he had remarked, bringing into play all options, including joining Pakistan.

Sheikh Abdullah in his autobiography *Aatish-i-Chinar* gave the Nehru-Sheikh tussle over Kashmir his own perspective. He wrote, "Pandit Nehru's love for Kashmir was more like a love for a beautiful woman whom he wanted to possess and that he had come to regard me as a rakib (rival in love)."

After Sheikh's arrest, his closest aide, Mirza Afzal Beg, founded Plebiscite Front in 1955. It favoured ascertaining people's will on the accession while fostering the idea of joining the Muslim brethren of Pakistan. Al Fatah was then founded as the first terrorist outfit in Kashmir, with direct or indirect blessings of the Sheikh.

According to Governor Jagmohan, "It drew substantial support from the Plebiscite leaders, particularly Mirza Afzal Beg. The top leaders of Al Fatah were guided, trained and motivated by Pakistan Intelligence—Major Habibullah, Major Qaisar Qureshi, Major Asgar and Zafar Iqbal Rather. They crossed the border several times. The youth wing of the Plebiscite Front worked in close liaison with Al Fatah's special organization—Young men League and Student Federation. Mirza Afzal Beg remained in clandestine touch with Ghulam Rasool Zehgir, the main organizer and leader of Al Fatah."*

Interestingly, as soon as Sheikh Abdullah agreed to give up his demand for plebiscite in Kashmir in 1974 and returned to power in J&K following an accord with Mrs Gandhi, pro-independence leaders of the Plebiscite Front resigned from it and set up the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) in the UK in May 1977. Amanullah Khan became its head. The organization was supported by expatriates of the Mirpur community who lived in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK).

Amanullah Khan's JKLF promoted itself as an outfit that was waging a struggle on three fronts—political, through mobilization of public opinion; diplomatic, via lobbying with third countries; and armed struggle against Indian security forces in the border state.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the JKLF operated mostly from London and POK. Amanullah Khan and Hashim Qureshi directed it from London, while Farooq Haider and Mohammed Muzaffar held office in POK. Their activities were, in large measure, confined to propagating the cause of a plebiscite in J&K and mobilizing international support for it.

But before JKLF was formed, its leaders, using various other banners, indulged in terrorist activities. One such instance was the hijacking of an Indian Airlines aircraft in 1971 by Ashraf and Hashim Qureshi. Maqbool Butt, one of the co-founders of JKLF, who escaped from an Indian jail in December 1968, was involved in planning the hijacking.

Though Butt had escaped to POK, he returned to India in 1976. He was again arrested, and in 1980, sentenced to death for killing a police officer in 1968. The sentence was, however, kept in abeyance.

On February 3, 1984, some Kashmir Liberation Army activists kidnapped Indian Deputy High Commissioner in Birmingham, Ravindra Mhatre, and demanded Butt's release. The demand was turned down and Mhatre was killed on February 6. The death sentence against Butt was revived and implemented on February 11. The abductors of Mhatre, who were JKLF members, had floated the Kashmir Liberation Army to carry out the act.

A British court acquitted Amanullah Khan in the Mhatre killing case, but the government served a deportation notice on him. Khan fled to Pakistan

and assumed leadership of the JKLF. He established contact with Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) to build a network of training camps in Pakistan for youth from J&K to carry out subversive activities in Kashmir and elsewhere.

Islamic Students League members, which included HAJY, formed the nucleus of JKLF in the Kashmir Valley. In 1987-88, the activists crossed over to Pakistan for indoctrination and training, meetings with Amanullah Khan, Dr Farooq Haider and others of JKLF, as also the Pakistan authorities.

They were also able to catch the attention of Pakistan President General Zia-ul-Haq and received his direct patronage in starting an armed struggle for 'liberation of Kashmir'. They also became a part of Gen. Zia's policy of bleeding India through a thousand cuts.

Gen. Zia's sudden death in August 1988 in an air crash affected the fortunes of JKLF. The new Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and her advisors decided that JKLF alone could not serve their purpose in Kashmir because it claimed to be secular and stood for an independent Kashmir. Pakistan's spy agency ISI reduced its support to JKLF, and at the same time, floated a number of new outfits that were more Islamist—more strident and more dependent on it.

Amanullah Khan was frustrated by this development. In a lengthy interview with Urdu Daily Jang of Lahore, published in July 1991, Khan said that he was disillusioned with Pakistan Government which first supported his organization when it began terrorist activity in Kashmir in 1988, but then raised other terrorist groups to counter it physically and ideologically.

The authors interviewed a Pakistan Army Major code-named Umar Bhai in 1991, in which he candidly spoke about his country's role in stoking terrorism in Kashmir. He gave details of how the ISI had put the nuts and bolts of Operation Professor in place before launching its men directly into conflict. "I am from the regular Pakistan Army; I'm a Major and stationed in Kupwara sector for over a year now. We have a definite plan for Kashmiri militants and it has been in place for some time now," he admitted with surprising frankness.

Umar Bhai was not the only officer to be stationed in Kashmir. Lt. Colonel Sayeed Saleem Gardezi stayed in Lolab Valley for 40 days in 1980 to assess strengths and weaknesses of the Kashmir movement. Colonel Masood Sarfaraz visited the Valley in 1987-88 and stayed for 8 months besides more than a dozen or more other officers who made short trips to meet Kashmiri militants. Pakistan officers established definite lines of communication and safe havens. New militant outfits were also birthed—Hizb-ul-Mujahideen was the most prominent one under Crush India Operation. The current plan, under the umbrella of Crush India Operation, was codenamed Operation Professor. It was the largest operation mounted since Pakistan lent its support to Kashmir militancy with Operation Topac. A gun is called topac in Pashto language.

The plan was an open secret. Indian intelligence agencies were fully aware of it. Political interference at every level however tied their hands. They knew Operation Professor was being implemented in two phases. The first phase entailed targeting Indian Army units stationed in the Valley. The second phase aimed at creating panic all over India through kidnappings, killings and bomb blasts.

An elaborate organizational network was set up for this operation by ISI. Hizb-ul-Mujahideen leaders—Maqbool Ilahi and Imran Rahi—were appointed as joint chief commanders and the cadre for Jihad-e-Kashmir operation was trained in Muzaffarabad by Saleem Gardarzi. The overall command for Kashmir militants was provided by Qazi Hussain Ahmed, the Air (chief) of Jamaat-e-Islami, Jammu, while the chief patron of the entire operation was Syed Salahuddin, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen boss, who had crossed over from POK to India, despite the Rs 25 lakhs reward on his head.

Apart from the joint chief commanders, Illahi and Rahi, Salahuddin had Shamsul Haq, general secretary of HM, under him. He was designated as the chief commander, operations, while Master Assan Dar headed the intelligence wing of HM; they reported to Salahuddin.

Funding for such a large network was not an issue. HM spent Rs 45 lakhs on its cadre every month. Each district commander was allotted 313 militants. They were divided into companies of 10 platoons of 33 and a section of 11. Though Hizb-ul-Mujahideen was tasked to execute the

operation, all other militant outfits, except Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front, were co-opted—the Peoples League, Ikhwan-e-Muslimeen, Al Umar Mujahideen, Al Barq, Tariq-ul-Mujahideen and Jamait-ul-Mujahideen, etc.—into it. Simultaneously, a United Jihad Council was formed with Abdul Majid Dar, general secretary of HM, as its chairman. Dar earlier ran training camps for militants in Muzaffarabad under the name of Tariq-Jihad-e-Islam. Besides, another coordinating body for militants was formed under the name of J&K War Council. It was headed by Bilal Siddiqui, who was the first militant to bring Kalashnikov rifles into the Valley in 1988.

The Major revealed that various district units of HM were interconnected through their own wireless system, as well as to Muzaffarabad. Daily reports of activities in the Valley were sent to the militants' secretariat in Zaingair in Sopore district. The Indian Army launched many searches to locate it, but their efforts had proved futile.

The Major had supervised ISI's Operation Zarba Hyder in August-September 1990 in Kashmir to 'liberate' areas in Bandipur and Kupwara districts. The operation put in place a lot of Afghans armed with latest weaponry, including missiles and anti-aircraft guns. About 200 youth from UP were also imparted arms training. They travelled to Pakistan via Nepal.

He said that 50 Pakistani militants had entered the Valley under the command of Hamza Khan from Gujranwala in Pakistan; another 500 Afghani nationals had spread out in Kupwara Budgam, Baramulla, Pulwama, and Anantnag districts. He gave the names of foreign militants active in Kashmir—Ibn Masood, an engineer from Sudan, Dr Abu Amar of Oman, Abdul Qayoom from Uzbekistan, and Akbar Qureshi of Afghanistan. They have been in Kashmir for a couple of years now—coming and going as per the need of the situation.

Before leaving, the Major announced dramatically, "Operation Profession will begin on January 26, 1992."

*Jagmohan, My Frozen Turbulence in Kashmir (India: Allied Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2019

Chapter

16

In less than six months as Chief Minister, Farooq Abdullah's charisma was in dumps. He had returned to power, but the election victory created widespread public disapproval. People were convinced that he subverted their mandate for immediate political gain and betrayed their confidence in connivance with the Congress. The talk of the 'great betrayal' was fuelled by JKLF leaders as well as his own party men. They pointed out that though the MUF secured more than 40 per cent of the vote, including the share of J&K People's Conference, it won just four seats. NC, on the other hand, won 40 seats, while the Congress bagged 26. Simple arithmetic was enough to prove that Farooq had stolen the mandate.

National Conference Member of Parliament Rashid Kabuli, perhaps, expressed the general mood when he said that he was 'disgusted' with Farooq. "He has only indulged in suppression and rigging and the voter has been robbed by him. He has delivered nothing to the Kashmiris despite his tall promises."

Kabuli said that Farooq had not consulted his colleagues before signing the Accord with Rajiv, nor had the Congress leader spoken to anyone. There was, therefore, widespread disaffection in both the parties. Kabuli was travelling from Jammu to Delhi with Rajiv Gandhi a day after the Accord was formalized when he was asked about the fall out of the move. "It will be a disaster," Kabuli told him bluntly, "especially for the Congress." Rajiv thought for a moment and then said, "Kabuli sahib, you have known our family for so long. Why didn't you say so earlier?"

“Did you ask me?” he shot back.

Farooq reacted sharply to the accusations of vote manipulation. In an interview with India Today, he lashed out not only at his detractors but also at the people. “The trouble in Kashmir is that they think everybody’s a crook. They said the same thing in 1983. But they couldn’t prove a damn thing. And now let them keep saying that again until kingdom come. But it doesn’t deter me from the path I’ve chosen. Let them go to the courts and the tribunals.”

He continued the diatribe, “Forty years ago these people had no clothes. Were they even the owners of their own fields? There was not even a pyjama in the villages. Today, we’ve become masters of the land. They have tinned roofs with clean drinking water. Where the hell do you think these things come from? I just gave government employees pay relief worth Rs 34 crore. Where the hell do they think this came from? And I did this without raising taxes . . . What do you want me to do? How long can I afford to keep quarrelling with the Centre and tolerate the suffering of the common man in Kashmir? My father went through worse than this.”

Farooq’s self-righteous indignation added fuel to fiery anger on the streets. He was not allowed to offer prayers at Srinagar’s Eidgah mosque on Id-ul-Azha even though an unprecedented security bandobast was in place. When he rose to speak, the crowds moved out of the mosque. Two months earlier, Farooq was manhandled by angry demonstrators while he tried to perform his namaz. The fury against him was so intense that angry youth in Srinagar’s Lal Chowk uprooted two iron pillars from their foundations. A portrait of Farooq and his father Sheikh Abdullah was strung between these pillars; they ripped it to shreds.

On July 13, 1987, Kashmir Martyrs’ Day, Farooq led a customary procession to mark the occasion. Very few people attended the ceremony. The police feared that he would face public anger. Armed policemen, therefore, forcibly entered houses along the route and kept vigil from windows. Srinagar police was so stretched for men to guard the area that it called in police academy’s new recruits to ensure the Chief Minister’s safety.

Farooq said that he was not bothered. He added, “I know the price I’m paying. If I’d have taken the easy path, I wouldn’t be talking to you today. But I’m not going to look back. This is a fight to the finish and may God help us. And contrary to what people say, I’m not worried about my security. I still get down on the roadsides and I eat bhuttas with the people. If they want to kill me, let them kill me.”

Farooq’s regime was also in strong contrast with the Governor’s rule preceding it. Jagmohan had moved swiftly and efficiently to root out corruption in government departments and address public grievances. One of his famous initiatives was the takeover of the Vaishno Devi shrine near Jammu. He constituted a trust to run its affairs. The results were spectacular even in the short term. Jagmohan also stopped the diversion of State and Central funds to the pockets of politicians by setting up an effective system. However, as soon as Farooq was sworn in, the old system returned with a vengeance. Funds meant for development activity were diverted to Farooq’s pet projects, including the setting up of a golf course on the banks of the Dal Lake.

Farooq also became intolerant. A satire broadcast on Doordarshan, Srinagar, showed a king beseeching Delhi royals for more charity. “Your coffers will not run short if you give me more money, but no matter how much you give me, I will always be short,” he said in the show. The caricature resonated with the people. It was widely quoted on the streets. Farooq angrily demanded for it to be taken off air immediately.

Mufti made a dramatic re-entry into State politics. He was sidelined by Rajiv Gandhi and a frustrated Mufti quit as Union minister. He was the first Kashmiri politician who had resigned a Central position. It gave him a halo, more so because his rival Farooq had chosen to ‘sell’ himself out to the Centre. Mufti was, therefore, accorded the biggest-ever welcome to any leader in the State’s history. The Congress and NC cadres, peeved with their top leadership, gravitated towards him.

Farooq, nevertheless, suddenly announced a decision that caused widespread outrage, first in Jammu, and then in Kashmir. The ‘bolt from the blue’ was unleashed by him to shore up his popularity in the State. It

boomeranged—it sunk his ratings even further and seriously damaged the honeymoon with the Congress.

The capital of J&K traditionally shifted from Srinagar to Jammu during the winter months. The shifting, called the Durbar Move, involved movement of about 5,000 government employees of 37 departments to Jammu at a cost of Rs 4 crores. The winter move ensured equitable access to the government for citizens of the two major regions of the State. It also ensured that the governmental work was not stalled by the freeze of the winter months in Srinagar.

On October 7, 1987, in the middle of the Durbar Move, Farooq announced that 20 of the 37 departments would not shift to Jammu. The reaction was strong and swift because it deepened the existing suspicion in the mind of Hindu-dominated Jammu that Srinagar would henceforth be the State's permanent capital despite assurances to the contrary.

Farooq had toyed with the idea since January because of an off-hand remark made by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi during a road journey with him from Jammu to Srinagar. The commute was tough for them because of heavy snowfall and Rajiv wondered how people in the Valley managed when the government shifted to Jammu. Farooq used the remark a month later in a televised statement which said his government would initiate action on discontinuing the Durbar Move after the March 1987 elections.

The announcement was greeted with loud protests. Farooq backtracked immediately. He denied he ever made a statement on the issue. But once the elections were over, he quietly got a paragraph inserted in the Governor's first address to the Assembly favouring the phasing out of the Durbar Move. The mention once again raised heckles from opposition members and also his coalition partner, the Congress. Farooq backed down once more. He assured the House that a decision on the Durbar Move would be taken after due consultations with public representatives, especially MLAs from Jammu region.

Though Farooq's October 7 announcement was unilateral and sudden, it was clear that the Chief Minister had carefully planned it over the months. The Congress had lost its relevance in the Valley when the alliance with NC

was sealed. The situation was further compounded by the sidelining of leaders like Moulvi Iftikhar Ansari and Mufti Mohammad Sayeed. The only substantive showing of the Congress was in the Jammu region; Farooq targeted the party's turf.

Farooq quoted Rajiv's remark to make it appear that the Congress wished to abandon the Durbar Move. He calculated that public resentment over the discontinuance would be directed at the Congress. He would, however, win accolades in the Valley and emerge as a hero who had vanquished the stronghold of erstwhile Dogra rulers. It was a bit of a gamble, but Farooq wasn't risk averse. At the very least, it would revive him in the Valley.

As was expected, the move triggered off a severe public backlash. Jammu region protested with a total closure for 10 days. People came out into the streets, courted arrests and formed human chains to protest the decision. The Congress, a coalition partner, was caught on the wrong foot. Its leaders could not openly protest it. They were non-plussed; they went into a shell. Their silence earned them the sobriquet of gaddar (traitors). Their homes were gheraoed and stoned. Several Congress MLAs fled to Delhi fearing the violent public reaction against them. The situation developed exactly as Farooq had visualized. The Congress was isolated in its own backyard.

While Jammu was in turmoil, a parallel agitation began in Srinagar in favour of Farooq's announcement. Prominent lawyers of the Valley called for a strike a few days after the bandh in Jammu began. The Srinagar Bar passed a resolution demanding that the city should be made the permanent capital of the State.

Congress leader Mangat Ram Sharma rushed to Delhi after facing 10 days of torment to brief the Central leadership. "We were elected to serve Jammu's interests but now the people are convinced we have deserted them. We have lost all credibility and there are doubts if we can ever get it back again. NC MLAs are telling the people that the Prime Minister wanted the State government to phase out the Durbar Move," he cried out before Rajiv Gandhi.

The Congress leadership spent considerable time in taking a decision. On November 13, 1987, Home Minister Buta Singh arrived in Srinagar and

directed Farooq to rescind the decision. Farooq listened to him patiently, agreed to cancel it immediately, but took no action. Buta Singh had to telephone him from New Delhi and demand urgent compliance. The Chief Minister still took his time. He went on television in the evening to announce that the October 7 decision was scrapped. The shut down in Jammu was withdrawn.

The move provoked a backlash in the Valley. The bar association went on an indefinite strike against the rescission. It alleged that Farooq had surrendered to Delhi while protecting Jammu's interests over those of Srinagar. Complete shutdowns were observed in Kashmir, and parties like the MUF joined the fray. They demanded Farooq's resignation. The tables were truly turned on the Chief Minister now. The political losses which Farooq had supposedly inflicted on the Congress came home to roost. The Valley was soon suffused with virulent anti-Farooq agitations.

Moulvi Farooq, an ally of the Chief Minister, felt the heat of public sentiment enough to publicly declare, "It was immature of him to have done all this. He should have resigned before allowing the Centre to interfere in Kashmir affairs. It has created bitterness everywhere."

Notwithstanding the public discontent on both sides of the Pir Panjal range, Farooq willy-nilly implemented the November 14 agreement dictated by Buta Singh. The 20 departments, which were held back in Srinagar, shifted to Jammu as part of the Durbar Move. Rajiv Gandhi was deeply disappointed with Farooq's manipulations. It was clear to him that his 'friend' was playing his own game at the expense of the Congress. He started to cool off towards him; the NC-Congress honeymoon had turned bitter overnight.

In Srinagar, Farooq settled the lawyers' agitation by telling them that the government favoured their demands in principle. A committee was set up to negotiate the details with them. Though assurance ended the agitation, the episode cost him dearly. After the 'vote rigging' in 1987, this was the second time the Valley felt it was betrayed by Farooq at the behest of the Centre. He was labelled as a stooge of the Congress.

The onrush of one crisis after another did not disturb Farooq's keenness to pin down Swami Dharendra Brahmachari. The raid on Shiva Gun Factory, before he was ousted by G.M. Shah in a coup, hadn't been enough, and soon after he regained political clout, Farooq visited Swami Dharendra Brahmachari in New Delhi on January 1, 1987. The Swami was 'really surprised', given the coldness in their relationship. After exchanging pleasantries, Farooq came directly to the point. He demanded the Swami to place his two planes and a Mercedes car at his disposal for personal use. The yoga guru pleaded that his planes were not air worthy; Farooq was displeased by the response.

On May 6, 1988, an updated notification of the acquisition of Aparna Ashram at Mantalai was pasted on the walls of the complex. Brahmachari moved the High Court on May 27, 1988. In his petition, ironically drafted and argued by D.D. Thakur, ex-Deputy Chief Minister who supported Farooq in the succession struggle, the Swami said the 'mala fide' action was directed against him because of Swami's inability to oblige Farooq's friend, Poornima Chaudhary.

Poornima Chaudhary, the Swami said, was the wife of Umang Chaudhary. She was allotted two plots of land in Industrial Estate, Jammu, adjacent to his Shiva Gun Factory. Since she did not develop the plots for industrial activity, they became liable for resumption by the State government.

Poornima also managed a technical school situated in front of the Aparna Ashram building in Jammu. Poornima had met Brahmachari earlier on her own during one of his visits to Jammu and asked him to buy her plots for Rs 5 lakhs. He had declined the proposal.

A few weeks later, Brahmachari bumped into Farooq during a flight from Jammu to Delhi. Farooq asked Swami to meet him the next time he was in Jammu. Swami went to see him in the first week of April, 1988. Farooq 'again expressed his unhappiness' to Swami for not giving him his luxury car and aircraft, and said that 'he would hurt him further if he did not oblige by paying Rs 5 lakh to Poornima Chaudhary'.

Brahmachari tried to plead his case against the purchase of the plots since they were to be resumed, but Farooq was adamant, "You go home. Bring Rs

5 lakh and see me at the Secretariat in an hour. I will tell the Chaudharys also to be present there to hand over the documents to you and you deliver the money to them today itself.”

Brahmachari went home, thought about it and decided against giving the money ‘without having formal transfer of the plots in his favour’. Meanwhile, Poornima rang him up to find out whether he was bringing the money to Farooq’s office. Brahmachari plainly told her he was not in a position to pay her. “It was at this point that she threatened the petitioner with dire consequences if he did not pay five lakh rupees to her . . . When the petitioner reached the Secretariat, he found the husband of Poornima Chaudhary sitting with the Chief Minister . . . In an offensive mood, the respondent (Farooq) told the petitioner that it would not be proper for him to disregard his request . . . ‘Swamiji sarkar ke hath bahut lambe hote hai . . . yeh mat samajhiye ki Farooq Abdullah aap ka kuch nahi bigad sakta, agar main chahu toh aapko jammu kashmir ki dharti se badar kar sakta hun’ (Swamiji, the government’s hands are long; don’t think Farooq Abdullah cannot harm you. If I want, I can uproot you from the land of Jammu and Kashmir) . . . Umang Chaudhary even used highly insulting language against the petitioner. Unable to put up with the insults and the threats, the petitioner stepped out of the Chief Minister’s chamber in utter disgust and disappointment, fully convinced that the respondent would misuse his power as Chief Minister and cause harm to him.”

Brahmachari further contended that ‘it was Farooq’s obnoxious desire of cementing and sustaining his notoriously known friendship with Poornima Chaudhary which lay deep rooted in his mind. He had given unimpeachable evidence of his sincerity to his friendship with the Chaudharys. There was another purpose equally important and alluring which pervaded his morbid mind. The salubrious surroundings and serenity of the Aparna Ashram complex; which he had experienced in the company of his friends, whose photographs were annexed to the petition, the wildness which he had exhibited on his visits to the complex, his desire to make the complex as the imperial abode to relieve himself of fatigue, and exhaustion of which he complained to the petitioner frequently, prompted him to order a government takeover of the ashram.’*

Swami Dharendra Brahmachari's disclosures led to prolonged arguments in court. The court finally ordered a stay on the notification which continued till the time of Swami's death in an air crash on June 9, 1994.

The case, widely reported by the Press, documented Farooq's liaisons and cemented his image as a 'playboy', and 'disco chief minister'—a phrase favoured by his sister Khalida Shah.

*Writ petition No.667 of 1988 filed before the Jammu and Kashmir High Court at Jammu

Chapter

17

The descent of Kashmir into a tortuous web of intrigue, blackmail, reconciliation, deception, and revolt was rapid. It was triggered by several actions of the Farooq Abdullah government. First, it imposed an electricity tariff increase in April 1988. People took to the streets in a series of violent demonstrations. Scores of people were killed in police firing across the Valley, and in parts of Jammu region.

For the first time, armed men joined the processions and fired from automatic weapons whenever they were confronted by the police. The government hit back with indiscriminate arrests in an attempt to weed out 'anti-national and fundamentalist elements' from the body politic.

Soon after, another agitation broke out against fungus-infested flour. Thousands of people, who consumed the 'chewing gum atta', fell sick. However, instead of rectifying the situation, the government arrested the agitators under anti-terrorism laws.

The action exacerbated the situation. Militants, armed with AK-47 rifles, unleashed a reign of terror on the hapless police force. They rode out into the main thoroughfares of towns and cities, and opened fire at police patrols. Others bombed government buildings and police stations. Agitating mobs dominated the street scene in Srinagar, Baramulla, Sopore, Anantnag and other towns. Anantnag, in fact, was rechristened Islamabad. "It is a war-like situation," Farooq Abdullah declared.

“I have been warning Farooq about the anger of the youth. I fear the worst now,” NC dissenter Rashid Kabuli lamented. Mirwaiz Farooq said that the ‘governmental ineptness, corruption and repression’ converted the youth into armed insurgents. They were trained and armed by Pakistan, and though the JKLF stood for an independent Kashmir, its war cry of azadi was now about freedom from India and an alignment with fellow religionist Pakistan. The JKLF, People’s League and Islamic Students League also came together under Shabir Shah, an aggressive leader who favoured secession from India. He freely admitted that his supporters were trained in POK camps that were set up with the ‘permission of Gen. Zia-ul-Haq’, and were supervised by General Rahman Khan before both of them died in an air crash.

“We are not in favour of terrorism, but we have armed ourselves to counter the repressive measures of Government of India against innocent people,” he told the authors. “We have to defend ourselves. There is no choice. Our democratic rights have been denied and a reign of terror has been let loose. Janab, Farooq Abdullah’s rigging was the turning point in Kashmir.”

The coalition was at the forefront of the violence against the government. It paralyzed life in Srinagar for over week in early 1989. It demanded the restaurants to honour the month of Ramzan by keeping their shutters down till evening prayers had taken place, and refrained from serving alcohol.

The government cracked down on the militant groups. It resulted in a call for a three-day shutdown from April 3, 1989, to protest the arrest of innocent young men by the police. On the third day, Anantnag police was confronted by a crowd, and while it was being disbursed, some police men entered Shabir Shah’s house, and took his 70-year-old father into custody, where he died.

The police said he had suffered a heart attack, while the family claimed he collapsed after he was hit with lathis by the police.

The death set off an orgy of violence in Anantnag. The ancestral home of Revenue Minister P.L. Handoo was burnt to the ground. Several Hindu homes were also looted and torched. The violence was, however, largely directed at government institutions. Mob ferocity forced the police to

abandon the town. A few hours later, Anantnag was handed over to the Army.

India Today reported that even as the Valley burned: “Abdullah was giving out signals that were symbolically, just wrong. Even senior government officers say he is more interested in playing golf these days than attending to matters of State. On March 4, when the city saw unprecedented violence in which the militants struck first by opening fire, Farooq was golfing and attending a cultural programme at Udhampur in Jammu. When he finally helicoptered to Srinagar from Jammu on March 5, a day on which the violence was spreading, he drove straight to his residence, presided over a high-level meeting to review the situation and returned to Jammu after less than two hours.”

For over a week, Srinagar suffered unprecedented violence. Politicians of all hues hid in their houses or escaped to Jammu fearing the violent mood on the streets. The State administration watched the mayhem from the sidelines.

It was obvious to all concerned that the State government had allowed the security situation to drift, and when it came to the crunch, it readily became its victim. But despite the situation, Farooq continued with his rhetoric from the pulpit of the Hazratbal shrine, surrounded by multiple rings of security running into hundreds of personnel. “Anyone with a gun, anyone even standing near a person with a gun will be shot,” he declared. “All hartals will be forcefully broken up even if it means breaking your locks. And, if this violence continues, Srinagar may have to be razed to the ground as was Batamaloo by the Indian Army in 1965 when raiders entered from Pakistan,” he added.

Farooq’s threats provoked a backlash and even moderate voices veered around to hardcore dialectics. At one of the Friday prayers, Mirwaiz Farooq asked the 3-lakh strong crowd not to buy VCRs to watch Hindi films, but to use the cash to purchase guns.

Before the namaz, led by Mirwaiz, names of ‘martyrs’ who were killed in police firing were read out, and later, the congregation prayed for their souls. The lane leading to the mosque was lined with vendors selling

pictures of the martyrs and large posters of Pakistan's deceased President Gen. Zia-ul-Haq. The whole area of Rajouri Kadal in downtown Srinagar in fact was seized by anti-India and pro-Pak frenzy to the extent that it was referred to as Chhota Pakistan (Mini Pakistan), both by the residents as well as by others living in different parts of the Valley.

Rajouri Kadal drew inspiration from Sikh extremists. A locality Zaina Kadal was labelled the Akal Takht, while another area was called Khalistan. There was a Balochistan and a Palestine too, amidst a population which lived in squalid and cramped quarters of the downtown. The police didn't dare to enter the Pak area. "You are crossing into Pakistan," a teenager merrily announced to journalists who were visiting Zaina Kadal. "Show me your passport and visa."

The area also birthed sub-groups of the main organizations—the J&K People's League and JKLF—like Al Fatah, Al Jihad, Janbaz Force, Victory Commando, Maqbool Force, etc. They demanded attention and obedience by issuing diktats and extortion notes. Interestingly, 40 per cent of the Valley population was between 20 and 30 years of age at that time, and therefore, highly volatile. Also, militancy was rampant in only five districts—Karnah, Baramulla, Srinagar, Badgam, and Anantnag—where the bulk of Kashmiri-speaking Muslims resided.

As an ethnic or linguistic entity, they numbered about 16 lakh of the State's 32 lakh Muslims. The rest are Gujjars, Pahadis, and Punjabis from areas like Doda, Poonch, Uri, and Karnah who had neither participated in the Sheikh's movement nor in pro-Pakistani stirs. Sheikh Abdullah was wary of them because they could overwhelm Kashmiri-speaking Muslims. He kept them at a distance from the centre of power.

Ministers within the government were restive with Farooq's response to the rot in the State. Fed up with his lackadaisical attitude, his confidante, Tourism Minister R.S. Chib, put in his papers in July 1989. He was persuaded to stay with a promise that an effective action would be initiated to resolve the situation. He waited for two months and then resigned in disgust over the 'anarchical conditions, unprecedented chaos in the annals of administration', and rampant corruption.

Chib was important for NC. An ex-serviceman with considerable influence in Jammu's Poonch area, he had worked hard to lend credibility to NC in the region. "I cannot tolerate Farooq any longer," he told the authors, "He's refusing to handle the situation. I don't know why he's not doing it even when we are at the lowest ebb, both administratively as well as politically."

The Centre, meanwhile, weakened too. Rajiv Gandhi was in the eye of a political storm unleashed by his colleague Vishwanath Pratap Singh. He alleged that Rajiv received kickbacks from the Bofors gun deal and resigned from the Congress. Powerful ministers like Arun Nehru, Arif Mohammad Khan and Mufti Mohammad Sayeed also quit, and joined hands with Singh. The Rajiv Gandhi government was plagued with a severe credibility crisis.

The situation cut both ways for the Chief Minister of J&K. On the one hand, the central leadership was preoccupied with its own political upheavals, and therefore, Farooq had a relatively free hand to administer the State. On the other hand, the Centre's support for him vacillated from firm to none.

Farooq was initially encouraged by New Delhi to adopt a hard approach to deal with protestors after the 1987 elections. Paramilitary forces were deployed in increasing numbers in the Valley to put down 'anti-national, pro-Pak' elements. Arun Nehru, as Internal Security minister, was of the firm view that the 'police approach' was needed in the State. The approach boomeranged.

Fear and loathing were the dominant mood in the Valley as 1989 notched its last couple of months on the calendar. Militants dominated the commanding heights of public discourse in the Valley, while the government functioned from the lowest trenches. On Pakistan Independence Day, August 14, a huge procession was taken out in Srinagar, in which the Pakistan flag was accorded a 21-gun salute. On August 15, India's Independence Day, black flags were unfurled, inflammatory slogans were raised, and the national flag was burnt.

Intriguingly, Sunday Mail reported, "On August 15, Dr Farooq Abdullah, Chief Minister of J&K, neither unfurled the national flag nor saluted the

flag when the national anthem was played. A policeman performed these customary functions. This has puzzled observers here.” A series of bomb explosions rocked the State later in the day in which 70 people were injured and several buildings were damaged. Congress State Chief Mohammad Shafi Qureshi’s car was blown up at his residence. A bomb explosion in Hindu-dominated locality Habba Kadal injured 27, including nine women.

In New Delhi, buffeted by strong opposition headwinds, Rajiv Gandhi announced general elections to the Lok Sabha to garner a fresh mandate. The election was scheduled in the last week of November, 1989. Valley militants reacted strongly—they forbade public participation in the electoral process. The directive was observed in letter and spirit. No one dared to put up posters or banners, and no election meetings were held. There was complete silence, broken only by the sound of heavy boots of paramilitary men patrolling the streets.

National Conference was the only major party that put up its candidates in the three parliamentary seats in the Valley—Srinagar, Anantnag, and Baramulla. No one filed nomination papers against the NC nominee in Srinagar. Mohammad Shafi Butt was declared elected unopposed. Goaded by security forces, token nominations were filed against P.L. Handoo, in Anantnag, and Saifuddin Soz in Baramulla.

The silence in the Valley aroused fears in the administration that no one will defy the diktat of the militants and cast its vote on the polling day. Security forces were, therefore, ordered to at least ensure respectable voter participation, even if it meant threatening the voters to walk into a polling booth. The effort did not produce the desired result. Baramulla recorded just 5.4% vote, while Anantnag notched up 5.67 %. Soz’s victory margin in the poll was a farcical 91.87 %. Handoo scored even better; 97.19% of the votes were polled in his favour. In contrast, Jammu, Udhampur and Ladakh seats saw engaging contests. In Ladakh, 86.25% votes were cast; 56.89% in Jammu and 39.45% in Udhampur. Congress won the last two seats, while Ladakh was captured by an independent candidate.

The parliamentary elections ousted Rajiv Gandhi from power. Vishwanath Pratap Singh of Jan Morcha was sworn in as the new Prime Minister. He chose Mufti Mohammad Sayeed as his Home Minister. It was the first time

in history that a Muslim, and a Kashmiri, was appointed to the most sensitive portfolio in the Union ministry. Singh said his government would go all out to 'heal hearts' and 'connect with the people'.

Mufti took charge, and, on December 8, just three days after the government formation, when he was explaining the psyche of Kashmiris to seasoned bureaucrats of the ministry, his daughter was kidnapped in Srinagar.

Rubaiya was an intern at the Lal Ded Memorial Women's Hospital in Srinagar. At 3 p.m., she finished her duties and boarded public transport, a van, to return to her home in Nawgaon on the outskirts of the city. Three men suddenly got up from their seats, held Rubaiya at gun point and bundled her into a waiting blue Maruti car. The kidnapping and the stowing away of the victim took barely 20 minutes.

Two hours later, an unidentified caller broke the news to her family. Simultaneously, a reporter of Kashmir Times received a call from a JKLF spokesperson who confirmed the kidnapping and demanded the release of prominent separatist leader Abdul Hamid Sheikh and militants Sher Khan, Noor Muhammad Kalwal, Altaf Ahemed and Javed Ahemed Jargar from prison.

Oddly, despite the mayhem created by separatists in the Valley, neither the State government nor the Centre had cared to provide security to the family of a politician as prominent as Mufti. Rubaiya was alone and defenceless when she was kidnapped.

Mufti had indeed instructed his son not to venture out of the house in view of the militancy, but the safety of Rubaiya was not on his mind. The Islamic militants, he believed, would not harm a woman; it was against their faith.

The kidnappers did not harm her. They treated her well, and used her as an instrument to humiliate Mufti personally, besides the State and Central government. The JKLF held Government of India hostage via Rubaiya, and for six excruciating days, international spotlight was on India's weak-kneed response to the high-profile abduction.

Farooq Abdullah was in USA for a medical examination when Rubaiya was kidnapped. He rushed back to Srinagar to find the backroom negotiations were in the hands of M.L. Bhat, an Allahabad High Court judge; Abdul Ahad Guru, the doctor attending on Hamid Sheikh at the Soura Hospital where he was recovering from injuries sustained in an encounter with the police; Mir Mustafa, an independent MLA; and Mirza Abdul Qayyum, a prominent local person. Mufti personally chose them for talks with the abductors.

The terrorists demanded that their colleagues should be released four hours ahead of the release of Mufti's daughter. The Home Minister agreed to it. But when Farooq heard of it, he put his foot down. The exchange would take place simultaneously, he insisted, bargaining on the fact that it was the State government, not New Delhi, which was to order the release of the terrorists.

Farooq also did not favour the release of terrorists 'in principle'. There could be no give-and-take; the terrorists had to be pressured to give and not take, he said. On December 12 midnight, J&K Chief Secretary Moosa Raza told the media that the Chief Minister had set up a Cabinet sub-committee earlier in the day. It had considered the JKLF's proposal of delayed release of Rubaiya and rejected it.

JKLF reacted with a chilling message: "We are going to kill Dr Rubaiya any time and you will find her body in any part of the city." The threat set off alarm bells in Delhi. Ministers Inder Kumar Gujral and Arif Mohammad Khan rushed to Srinagar in the wee hours of the morning. They confronted Farooq over his delaying stance. It was only when they 'gave him a dressing down that the final settlement forged'.

Justice M.L. Bhat commented, "If everything had gone as planned, the girl would have been back on December 10. All the controversy, which got the full glare of media publicity, could have been avoided."

The Week magazine in its report mentioned: "The intense hostility between Mufti and Farooq's camp was apparent. Farooq maintained that the abduction had been stage-managed by Central ministers keen to dismiss his government. Supporters of Mufti, on the other hand, painted Farooq as the

villain of the piece. They say Farooq had met Amanullah Khan in London and hatched a plan to embarrass Mufti—a Home Minister who could not protect his daughter could scarcely instil public confidence. Apart from the charges levelled, there was considerable mutual suspicion. While the Home Minister had declared that it was the State government's responsibility to ensure the safety of the girl, Farooq did not want to accept such a responsibility should something go wrong . . . The showdown between the Union Home ministry and the State government almost threatened to go out of control."

Reporting on Farooq's stewardship of the State, The Week continued: "The NC-Congress coalition has remained a non-starter. It is at best an uneasy partnership . . . The Congress ministers have not been given a free hand. For instance, the Minister of State for Education did not deal with education but was put in charge of libraries and sports. The government has malfunctioned on every issue. There is large-scale unemployment and the economic performance of the government has been poor . . . Its credibility is sinking with each passing day. Srinagar newspapers are full of advertisements, and even sworn affidavits—all paid for—by National Conference leaders and activists that they are severing their links with the party once and for all. 'It is amazing how they are crumbling under the pressure of the militants,' said a Congress leader."

The release of Rubaiya was a non-event in Srinagar. The release of five militants in exchange for her pitched the celebrations at an unprecedented level. "Srinagar went berserk," The Week reported, "What one witnessed on the streets was nothing less than a cathartic outpouring of emotions of men, women and children breaking out in processions—big and small—to celebrate the release. Boys and youth took over the streets of Srinagar, stopping cars and buses to demand money which they needed for buying crackers . . . Women chanted in the streets in the commercially busy Lal Chowk, where the demonstrators hijacked a bus, got on top of it to raise a ladder against an electric pole and hoist a POK flag . . . We want to throw the Indian Army out, they said." Anti-India slogans and songs reverberated in the city till late in the night—Jo kare khuda ka khauf, Utha le Kalashnikov (If you are a god-fearing man then pick up a Kalashnikov rifle).

India Today summed up the situation even more graphically: “The abduction also swung the spotlight on Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah. It was evident that after 32 months of incompetent rule, he stood alone—alienated from his people; condemned by the Centre; and heading a floundering government in a troubled region. Particularly shameful was his government’s ineptitude in handling the affair.”

Farooq was subsequently summoned for an urgent meeting with the Prime Minister and the Home Minister, and told to get a hold on the administration in his State. He reshuffled the Cabinet, ordered some bureaucratic change and handed Srinagar, Anantnag, Baramulla, Sopore and Shopian to the Army. In other areas, the Director-General of Police was put in command.

Farooq did not visit the Valley during the crisis. As a matter of fact, through the 365 days of the year 1989, the Chief Minister was in Srinagar for just 40 days. Only a dozen or so meetings of the Cabinet were held despite the gravity of the situation in the State.

Intriguingly, a few months before Rubaiya’s kidnapping, Farooq Abdullah’s government had found time to release 70 Pakistan-trained hardcore terrorists on parole despite confirmation of their detention by the Advisory Board headed by the Chief Justice of the J&K High Court. All of them absconded thereafter.

Another strange development took place in mid-1989. Intelligence Bureau Headquarters organized a one-day conference of its staffers at Centaur Hotel in Srinagar at the invitation and request of Farooq Abdullah. IB field operatives were directed to attend the meeting, which, surprisingly was addressed by a regional political leader—Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah. The conference compromised the identity of IB officials, and made them easy targets for the terrorists.

A spate of killing of IB officials followed. On January 1, 1990, R.M.P. Singh, posted in Anantnag district was shot by JKLF terrorist Manzoor Darzi at the main bus stand. The official was returning home in the evening with groceries for his family staying in government quarters. His killings were celebrated by the locals. Two days later, on January 3, another IB

official Kishen Gopal Chauhan was shot dead by JKLF terrorist in Beerwah town market.

Moti Lal Bhan was targeted by Bitta Karate of JKLF on January 15, 1990. Bhan was on way to his office with his son, and boarded the Khanda shuttle bus service. Three youth, led by Bitta Karate, barged into the coach and ordered Bhan to get down. He protested. A co-passenger intervened on behalf of Bhan. Bitta shot him dead at point blank range. He then shot Bhan in the head. Bhan had played a key role in the arrest of Abdul Ahad Waza, a Pakistan-trained terrorist.

Tej Krishen Razdan, a Technical Officer in IB's Gupkar Road office in Srinagar, was visiting his ailing parents in Badyar. He boarded a bus for his return journey on February 14, 1990, but was forced to de-board at Gow Kadal in Srinagar and shot dead. His blood-soaked body was dragged from Gow Kadal to Red Cross Chowk, Maisuma Bazar, and left at the roadside for public view. In yet another incident, Rafiq Ahmed Wani of Shala Kadal, Srinagar, a security assistant in IB, was gunned down at his home. He was posted in Assam, but was in the town to celebrate Eid with his parents.

Sheikh Abdullah was particularly averse to the presence of Intelligence Bureau in Kashmir. He ensured that an IB official, who had filed early reports on his seditious moves in 1953, was transferred from the State. The Minister In charge of Kashmir Affairs Gopaldaswami Ayyangar gave in to the Sheikh's pressure for political reasons, but put his foot down when Sheikh insisted against posting a replacement. During talks for drafting the Delhi Agreement of 1974, Sheikh's representative Mirza Afzal Beg demanded that Intelligence Bureau operations in Kashmir should be wound up. The demand was rejected.

The killings in 1990 achieved the purpose to a very large extent. Intelligence network in J&K folded up after these events. It took years for IB operations to revive later.

Chapter

18

Utter mayhem broke out in Kashmir on the night of January 19, 1990.

The Vishwanath Pratap Singh government removed Governor K.V. Krishna Rao and re-appointed Jagmohan as the new head of the State during the day. “Mere haathon se aman ke parche khisak nahi jaane chahiye (I don’t want that the cards of peace to slip away from my hands),” Jagmohan said firmly on landing in Jammu for the swearing in. He clearly meant business.

Jagmohan’s return infuriated Farooq Abdullah. He had vehemently opposed Jagmohan’s reappointment. “Anyone but him, otherwise I will resign” he told the Prime Minister in an angry tone. George Fernandes , senior minister in Singh’s government, assured him it would be anyone but Jagmohan. More so because the BJP had demanded his reinstatement. But, in the end, Arun Nehru, Mufti and the Jagmohan lobby prevailed with the argument that only the former Governor could put down militancy with a firm hand.

Farooq announced he would resign within moments of the appointment. Rajiv Gandhi heard of it and asked Rajesh Pilot to arrange a face-to-face meeting with him. Pilot rushed to Jammu, picked up Farooq and took him to Delhi. Rajiv did not want him to quit at a vulnerable stage in Kashmir politics despite the provocation from the V.P. Singh government. Farooq refused to give in. “I’m resigning,” he said with finality, and left the meeting.

The after-taste of his dismissal by Jagmohan in a political coup launched by G.M. Shah was on in his mind. Farooq, though, had subsequently praised

Jagmohan's performance during the short Governor's rule before the 1987 elections. He said on November 7, 1986, "Governor sahib, we need you very badly. It's amazing such remarkable work could be done by you in a short time. Please do not hesitate to pull my ears if I go wrong."

His humble tone soon changed into an aggressive one when Jagmohan wrote to the Centre that Farooq's government had 'truly fallen apart' and 'only constitutional rites remain to be performed'. He became hostile towards the Governor.

Farooq, thereafter, convinced Rajiv Gandhi to recall Jagmohan and appoint his friend Gen. K.V. Krishna Rao (retd.) in his place. Gen. Rao had worked with Farooq during his earlier stint as Governor and had not interfered with Farooq's plans. The situation in Kashmir worsened.

The appointment of Mufti Mohammad Sayeed as Home Minister and Jagmohan as new Governor came as a double whammy for Farooq. He was certain that the V.P. Singh government would use the law and order issue to dismiss him sooner than later. He resigned to stake high moral ground for himself. The abdication of responsibility was now complete. Curfew was clamped on Srinagar.

While the political drama was played out in Raj Bhawan, word spread on the streets on how kafirs were taking over Kashmir. Jagmohan was a kafir, and along with him, all non-Muslims of the Kashmir Valley were also infidels. It targeted the residual population of Kashmiri Pandits still living in the Valley despite the threats from terrorists.

Masked Kalashnikov-wielding JKLF and Hizb-ul-Mujahideen men descended on the streets of Srinagar as soon as Jagmohan took over. They opened indiscriminate fire to terrorize the Hindu population and raised frenzied cries of Allah-hu-Akbar. Loud speakers atop mosques minarets yelled at the Hindus and security personnel—*ay jabiro, ay zalimo, Kashmir hamara chhor dou* (You occupiers and oppressors, quit from our Kashmir). Three taped slogans played on a loop through the night—*Kashmir mei agar rehna hai, Allah-hu-Akbar kehna hai* (If you want to live in Kashmir, you have to say Allah-hu-Akbar); *Yahan kya chalega, Nizam-e-Mustafa* (What do we want here? Rule of Sharia); *Asi gachchi Pakistan,*

Batao roas te Batanev san (We want Pakistan along with Hindu women but without the men).

The shrill, incessant calls amidst the ominous shadow of terror provoked the exodus of the hapless Pandits on the fateful night of January 19, 1990. In several ways, it was the final straw that broke the community's back.

The program to oust non-Muslims started in earnest in the summer of 1989 when prominent members of the Pandit community received letters that asked them to leave Kashmir. "If you do not obey, we will start with your children first. Kashmir Liberation Zindabad." They were followed by press statements by Hizb-ul-Mujahideen in local Urdu papers like Aftab that ordered Hindus to quit Kashmir or face death. Posters of the threats also came up in Hindu localities of the city. Hizb men imposed the Islamic dress code and banned alcohol, video parlours and cinema halls. They forced people to re-set their watches and clocks to Pakistan Standard Time.

Alongside, business establishments and homes of Kashmiri Pandits were marked out and notices were pasted on the doors ordering the occupants to leave Kashmir within 24 hours or face death—Be one with us, run, or die! Reports of killing of Kashmiri Pandits also began to trickle in amidst the chaos. A thick black shroud of terror settled over the Valley.

Tika Lal Taploo, lawyer and BJP national executive member, was the first prominent Kashmiri to be killed by terrorists. He was shot dead by the JKLF in Srinagar on September 14, 1989. Three weeks later, retired Judge Neelkanth Ganjoo was killed in broad daylight. Justice Ganjoo had sentenced JKLF co-founder Maqbool Butt to death in a murder case.

In November, 1989, Sheela Tikoo was gunned down in Habba Kadal, while on February 13, 1990, Lassa Kaul, Station Director in Doordarshan, Srinagar, was shot dead. On the same day, a young social worker Satish Tikoo was also killed. On March 4, 1990, Mrs M.N. Paul, wife of an inspector in Border Security Force, was kidnapped, raped and murdered. In March again, B.K. Ganjoo, an engineer in telecom department, was brutally hunted and killed in his house while he was hiding in an empty drum used to store rice. In April 1990, a nurse Sarla Batt was kidnapped, and raped for several days before being killed.

Another shocking incident was on April 30, 1990. Four armed persons barged into the house of Sarwanand Kaul Premi in Anantnag district. They dragged him and his son Virender out of the house and shot both of them in a nearby forest. In May, Mrs Prana Ganjoo and her husband Prof K. L. Ganjoo were kidnapped in Sopore. The woman was raped and then both of them were shot dead. In June 1990, a lab assistant Girija was kidnapped in Trehgam. She was brutally raped and cut into pieces with a power saw. In June too, Mrs J. L. Ganjoo, her husband and sister-in-law were killed in their home in Ban Mohalla, Srinagar.

In July, Teja Dhar was shot dead on the roadside in Ali Kadal, Srinagar. Another woman Nanaji was gunned down in Batmaloo. Dr Shani was locked up in her house in Karan Nagar and burnt alive. In August 1990, Babli Raina was raped in front of her family and shot dead.

The list of those who were brutally tortured, raped and killed was long, but more than the names, what was truly numbing was the mortal fear and anguish they were to subjected to during the period.

Sometime in mid-1990, a BSF officer came across a half-burnt diary of a Kashmiri Pandit while inspecting the malkhana (storeroom) of the post. The diary was recovered from a burned down house in Srinagar. A mere turning of its pages brings the lived terror and its trauma alive to the reader.

The diary gives a heart-rending description of the prevailing situation in first person. The pages record the pain of the days the unidentified Kashmiri Pandit had spent holed up inside his house while awaiting an inevitable gory end. The diary starts with the departure of his family from Srinagar.

Some excerpts from the diary:

“There is no electricity again tonight. They switch off the lights as soon as evening descends and then crowds gather at mosques. There is one speech after another and . . . slogans of humko kya chahiye—azadi, azadi (We want freedom), Hindu bhag jao (Run away you Hindus) and cries of Allah-hu-Akbar. It is very frightening.

“Curfew, firing, burning of houses, the constant screech of police vehicles and azadi slogans have filled our days for some time now. They have held us prisoners. Girija and children couldn’t have withstood the strain any longer. It is good they left. I couldn’t go because of my posting here . . .

“ . . . As I sit alone in candlelight, waiting for dawn to break, memories rush to light up my mind with sparkling moments. I remember my childhood and the many Muslim friends and their families.

“ . . . I have not gone out of the house for a week now. Curfew and constant firing have forced me to remain indoors. Oh, how I wish to break free of these walls and roam around my valley once again . . .

“Today, I went to Lal Chowk after a long time to buy some provisions. The shopkeepers looked at me incredulously. Nobody said anything but as I moved around, I would hear the unspoken words, ‘Why are you still here. Why haven’t you fled?’ They were asking me through their loud silence. As I was completing my shopping, the loudspeaker began to crackle. The first cry of Allah-hu-Akbar burst forth. Suddenly, all the people around me started rushing towards the mosque for their afternoon prayers. It seemed as if a magnet had been switched on, and they couldn’t help but rush towards it. It was surreal. I had never seen anything like this before . . .

“What has happened to the people?

“My Muslim neighbour told me that in a few days everything would be under the direct control of the mujahideens. Allah’s men, he said, had all the desirable qualities of providing a just and fair government . . . there is violence on the face of the Muslims. Their slogans are sectarian. It looks as if Kashmir belongs to the Muslims only.

“ . . . My community has failed to grasp the import of this gruesome happenings. Many had earlier dismissed them as cases of personal vendetta. They did not recognize the menace of hate and terror. But now, Pandits are being killed every day. Others are running away to Jammu. Should I continue to live in a house that is already on fire? I am too tired to think. It is very dark outside; it is dark within my soul too.

“ . . . Soldiers came in today. They told me I am the only Pandit left in the locality. They were surprised why I hadn’t left. They asked me if I was being threatened or harassed by anyone. I wasn’t being threatened personally, so I said no. But what about the threats on the microphone? Haven’t they heard them? Why this all-round conspiracy of silence, of ignoring the obvious?

“But what is my fate? Where do I stand? My own people have pushed me to the fringes of vulnerability. If I leave this place because I feel threatened, then am I a traitor. If I stay on, I am a suspect, an agent of the enemy. I am an outcast, and an object of ridicule. What have I done to deserve this? Sunil would have said—your birth, you are a Pandit. In the new political lexicon of the Muslims, your entry has been erased to create space for a new socio-political order. So, you have to go.

“But I have decided I will not go, come what may. I will die where I was born even if I have become a stranger in my own land. I will risk death than go away.

“ . . . The walls close in on me, trapping me and killing me with their weight . . . slowly and painfully. I cannot protest even if I want to because I am alone. Even if I do, I will invite death. They have weapons, I am unarmed. I have already lapsed into a hopeless situation in which I can neither live the way I want to, nor fight what goes against it. What then is the purpose of my being alive? These thoughts are disturbing, they invade me all the time and destroy my peace and sanity.

“But as I write these words, I feel strong because I realize that my being here is itself an act of defiance. Though it may not seem heroic, it is as significant as the action of the person who is out there with a gun. My sheer presence is a challenge to the might of the militants because it demonstrates my refusal to bow down to their wishes.

“My writing too is another forceful mode of protest. By letting my thoughts flow freely, I assert my right to speak the way I want to. Someday, when the winds of change will blow away the oppressive climate of hate, these words will be understood in their true spirit and recognized as my protest against an inhuman, sadistic and depraved situation . . . I have to, therefore, resist

the present and keep going. I must continue here and write what I feel. Writing is my life now. My being here is my protest.

“ . . . Through the night yesterday there was gunfire. There were calls from loudspeakers in the name of Islam. I have become panicky . . . Girija, Vasu, Vinay . . . where are you? I want to hold your hand Girija . . .

“As I now sit by the candlelight and write, I hear gunfire all around me. I dare not peep out of the window but I can hear slogans getting louder and louder. They are marching towards my lane . . . the shouting and yelling are burning my ears. It is getting louder and louder . . . the voices are turning menacing . . . they are very near now . . . they can do anything . . . they have come to kill me . . . But I will not run away. I will continue to occupy my land defiantly till the last breath. It is the protest of a common man; an unarmed innocent being, who is under attack from vicious and depraved religious fanatics. They are banging at the door. They are carrying lighted torches with them . . . I will not open the door for the invaders . . . I will stand alone on the burning deck till my last moment . . . The house is on fire . . . This Pandit is ready for his agni pariksha . . . I will die, but Vasu and Vinay will live to tell my story . . . My diary will tell my story.”

Chapter

19

The dense eerie night of January 19, 1990, burst into a full-blown eruption of violence and arson on the morning of January 20. The newly appointed Governor Jagmohan was still in Jammu after his swearing in, but the administration in Srinagar ordered platoon after platoon of paramilitary forces into Srinagar's closely packed lanes and by-lanes to carry out house-to-house searches. The men broke household goods, and terrorized the residents with their strong-arm methods.

“The operation was planned by police and intelligence officials close to the Farooq Abdullah-Congress(I) combine without the knowledge of the new Governor,” India Today reported. “But the people could not know this. Spokesmen for the discredited Farooq regime, as well as pamphleteers from various terrorist organizations—as if in tandem—spread the word that the police action had been ordered by Jagmohan,” the report said.

Public reaction was overwhelming. Thousands of people took to the streets to protest the atrocity. When the protests became uncontrollable, army was called in. As many as 35 persons were killed in police firings and nearly 400 were arrested. The violence continued for a week. It killed 80 people. About 14 police and army personnel also lost their lives in the clashes.

Rajiv Gandhi's support to Farooq Abdullah continued; more so because the volatile situation in Kashmir put his *bête noire* Vishwanath Pratap Singh and Mufti on the mat. He said that since Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah did not favour the choice, Jagmohan shouldn't have been imposed on the State. The Congress leadership gave a Hindu communal twist to the

episode. It claimed that Jagmohan was appointed on the recommendation of RSS chief Balasaheb Deoras. The ‘communalist’ tag stuck to Jagmohan thereafter.

The volatile situation in the State gave Pakistan another opportunity to up the ante from across the border. Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto declared, “In their hour of need, the people of Jammu & Kashmir will not find us wanting.” Later, on her maiden visit to Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), she threatened to turn Jagmohan into ‘Bhag-Mohan’. In Lahore, a week later, she raised the Kashmiri slogan of azadi, azadi amidst the chants of Kashmir ki taqdeer, Benazir, Benazir (Benazir is Kashmir’s destiny) in front of a one lakh strong crowd. Defence analysts said that Pakistan and ISI were boosting ‘a festering-sore campaign—a psychological rather than military war’ with the hope that it would lead to a civil war in Kashmir.

The sabre rattling by a hostile neighbour did not get National Front’s leadership into a huddle. It rather forked out in different directions tilting at windmills. Home Minister Mufti was fixated on his personal political interests in the Valley. The interests stood in the way of Mufti adopting any of the two options available to him—revival of the Assembly or implementing effective law and order measures to counter jihadi violence. His personal credibility among the political elite in Kashmir and the masses was at its nadir after the kidnapping of his daughter by terrorists and his own weak-kneed response to their demands. In other words, no one really cared for Mufti or about his plan to bring back peace in the State. Mufti’s appointment was a wrong move which limited V.P. Singh’s options for wider consultations and non-partisan advice on Kashmir.

V.P. Singh, on his part, sought to balance one wrong move by another wrong move. He appointed Defence Minister George Fernandes as Minister In-charge of Kashmir. Fernandes liked Farooq Abdullah. He also liked the family of Farooq’s senior-most bureaucrat Ashok Jaitley. The complex relationship blinkered his perception of the situation in the Valley. Fernandes was of the view that the Centre should open negotiations directly with the militants and also rope in senior National Conference leaders to facilitate the process. In other words, he wanted Farooq should work hand-

in-hand with him to find a solution to the Kashmir tangle despite his unpopularity with the people.

The third angle in the National Front's Kashmir triangle was Governor Jagmohan, who was especially reappointed by the government to put the State back on the rails. Jagmohan believed that unemployment and an unsympathetic State machinery were at the root of the anger in Kashmir. The two issues had to be addressed on priority basis along with the security issue.

One of his first acts on assuming office, therefore, was to announce a scheme creating 9,000 jobs for Kashmiri youth in the BSF, and a programme to fill 3,000 teachers' vacancies within a month. On the law and order front, he ordered the release of those who had been illegally detained during the January 20 searches. A compensation, ranging from Rs 50,000 to Rs 1 lakh, was also paid to innocent victims of terrorist or police violence.

But Jagmohan was caught in a fix. He had to answer to two bosses who did not get along with each other—the Home Minister and the Minister In charge of Kashmir. Fernandes, did not like Jagmohan and snubbed him on all available occasions. He frequently visited Srinagar to meet militants, but the Raj Bhawan was kept out of the loop. He also reversed several decisions of the Governor on tackling the law and order situation because he claimed that he was reaching out to the hearts of the hardcore elements in the Valley. No one actually knew who he was referring to. Jagmohan was, therefore, overstretched to explain what his minister was doing in the salubrious climes of Kashmir even as the situation was deteriorating at an alarming pace.

The grimness of the situation can be gauged from the fact that New Delhi's writ in the Valley ran from Raj Bhawan through Gupkar Road to the nearby winter secretariat. Two hundred yards on each side was terrorist territory. When the administration announced a relaxation of from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m., militants imposed their own curfew. Not a soul came out into the streets. "The bulk of the people follow whatever institution wields the big stick. Today, that stick is in the hands of the militants."*

In the months that followed, Jagmohan did manage to handle the situation. By end of April, violence in major urban areas declined, day curfew was lifted by the administration, attendance in schools shot up and goods traffic was back to normal on the Jammu-Srinagar highway.

The relative peace was shattered on May 21, 1990. Three young men arrived at the residence of Mirwaiz Moulvi Farooq in downtown Srinagar on the fateful morning to meet him. They were ushered into his study by the gardener. A little later, the Mirwaiz stepped into the room, and they shot him dead.

The news of the shooting spread like wild fire in the old city. A large crowd rushed to Soura Medical Institute, forcibly took away Mirwaiz's body, and carried it on their shoulders through the lanes and by-lanes of the city, loudly mourning the loss their politico-religious mentor. When the crowd neared the headquarters of 69th battalion at Islamia College, the guards on duty panicked after hearing a gunshot. They thought that the crowd had gathered to attack the headquarters. They opened indiscriminate fire to control the supposed onslaught. As many as 57 people were killed in the shoot-out. Mirwaiz's murder, by chance or design, coincided with the visit of a US delegation led by the Deputy National Security Advisor Robert Gates to the sub-continent.

Mirwaiz's funeral was organized on the lawns of the Eidgah the next day. More than two lakh people gathered for prayers. Amid recitations from the Quran, militants emptied magazine after magazine of their Kalashnikovs into the air. They lobbed hand grenades near the graves of those killed in the police firing in a chilling salute to the 'martyrs'. As the body of the Mirwaiz was lowered into the grave, the crowd roared in one voice: Maulana ka kya irshad? Al jehad, al jehad (What did the Maulana call for? Holy war, holy war) and Maulana ka katil kaun? Jagmohan, Jagmohan (Who killed the Maulana? Jagmohan, Jagmohan).

Mirwaiz Moulvi Farooq's killing was not a random act of terror. He had emerged as the go-to man for George Fernandes because of his links with the JKLF leadership. Fernandes hoped to broker some sort of a peace deal with the militants through him. The hopes were dashed by a burst of gunfire.

Prime Minister Singh divested Fernandes of Kashmir portfolio on the eve of his 60th birthday, June 3. The security foul up was too grave not to have consequences. The veteran socialist was livid, and to show his displeasure, flew off to the US without notice to the government and his ministerial Kashmir Group.

Mirwaiz was opposed to the Jamaat-e-Islami. He had refused to answer their calls for secession from India. Since he had a sizeable population in the Valley, especially in Srinagar, under his sway, he had become a stumbling block in Jamaat's bid for complete dominance. He was critical of the politics of the Abdullah family too, though Farooq Abdullah had wooed him assiduously during the elections to sign the 'Double Farooq' pact. The alliance was short-lived and they had soon parted company. The Mirwaiz was, therefore, an irritant to both the Jamaat and the NC. His death opened the opportunity for the two parties to make inroads into the Awami Action Committee's support base, specifically in Srinagar.

Mirwaiz's murder caused an uproar in Parliament. Congress, the Left parties and some Janata Dal MPs blamed the Governor for the killing and demanded his recall. Prime Minister Singh ordered his replacement with G.C. Saxena, popularly known as Gary Saxena.

Saxena was a RAW veteran and security advisor to two former Prime Ministers—Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. Soft-spoken and media shy, Gary had distinguished himself in intelligence gathering during the 1971 Bangladesh liberation struggle and the subsequent war with Pakistan. He was also the man behind the formation of the elite Special Protection Group. Though his background made him the ideal choice for the most sensitive post in the country, he was not cut out for a role in which he had to deal with the complex politics, both at the Centre and in the State.

Politics at the Centre was in a quagmire. The Mufti's tenure as Home Minister was under serious threat after 50 Janata Dal MPs signed a memorandum seeking his removal from the ministry. His insecurity was heightened when he heard that the memo was tacitly backed by the Prime Minister. He was heckled in Parliament, too, for his mishandling of the Kashmir situation.

To add to his discomfiture, the Left parties mounted pressure on him to consult Farooq Abdullah on Kashmir policy. Mufti shuffled away from the situation by terming the former Chief Minister as ‘a man of the masses’. The continuous lobbying for Farooq and constant criticism made him so distraught that he rushed to Singh and offered his resignation. Singh, ‘the artful dodger’, assured Mufti of his support. “People ask for my resignation every day. Do I resign?” he smiled at him.

Mufti continued, but he became everyone’s favourite whipping boy for Singh’s decisions. He received the flak for the removal of Kashmir and Punjab Governors, Jagmohan and Nirmal Mukarji, respectively, though he had nothing to do with it.

Jagmohan’s case put him at his wit’s end. Mufti was accused of opposing Jagmohan soon after he was appointed. It was said Mufti interfered constantly in the Governor’s work. Later, when many parties demanded the Governor’s removal, the PM’s coterie let it be known that it was the Home Minister who backed him in order to counter Fernandes. And, when Jagmohan was removed, the blame was heaped upon him for the decision, though it was the Prime Minister who’d taken the call.

Similarly, when the Kashmir affairs cell was scrapped and a furious Fernandes rang up Singh to protest, the Prime Minister told him it was Mufti’s idea! Fernandes retorted that a solution to Kashmir was not possible as long as Mufti was the Home Minister.

The developments made it clear that Singh used Mufti to deflect criticism of himself over internal security policy issues. Veteran socialist leader Madhu Limaye summed it up pithily, “Indira Gandhi had Zail Singh. Rajiv Gandhi had Buta Singh. V. P. Singh has Mufti. All troubled Prime Ministers depend on incompetent Home Ministers who are political light-weights.” In fact, the Mufti’s handling (or the lack of it) of the Kashmir problem spilled more bad blood in Delhi’s corridors of power than what the terrorists managed to spill in the Valley.*

Farooq Abdullah, on the other hand, played his cards in a way that Mufti was fully isolated within the ruling dispensation. A fresh ‘White Paper’ on Farooq Abdullah’s ‘misdeeds as CM’, which Mufti was keen on releasing,

was junked because Fernandes and Left party leaders convinced Singh it was a misguided exercise.

In the mess of Centre's politics, the albatross of migration of Kashmiri Pandits and brutalization of the Valley population by security forces was well and truly hung around the necks of Governor Jagmohan and the Home Minister Mufti. On the streets of Jammu and Kashmir, the slogan Kashmir ki galiyan sooni hain, Mufti Mohammed khooni hai (Kashmir's streets are deserted. Mufti is a murderer) reverberated with furious intensity.

Farooq Abdullah stood on the sidelines and watched his rival tip over the political edge.

*Badhwar, Inderjit. "Terrorism takes a perilous turn in Kashmir." India Today, 1990. Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/19900430-terrorism-takes-a-perilous-turn-in-kashmir-812510-1990-04-29>

*Pachauri, Pankaj. "Home Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed under increasing pressure." India Today, 1990. Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19900630-home-minister-mufti-mohammed-sayeed-under-increasing-pressure-812733-1990-06-29>

Chapter

20

Farooq Abdullah left for London soon after he resigned as Chief Minister in 1990. “I have other things to do,” he told the authors on long distance phone call. “I will come back . . . Kashmir is my home. But I have lot of things to do in England first,” he said.

One of the things he had in mind was to get a licence from the British Medical Council and start his clinic in Brighton, London. “I do regret I joined politics. But I can’t go back now,” he said in a melancholic tone. He had no answer when asked whether he had abdicated responsibility by moving away from his State and the country. “Main kya jawab dun? (What answer can I give?) I have no answer.” He claimed he wasn’t in touch with political leaders; not even Rajiv Gandhi.

However, leaders were in touch with him. Former Defence Minister and now Railways Minister George Fernandes dropped in at his London home to talk politics. He told Farooq that Prime Minister Singh was keen to initiate talks with him. “Can you come down to Delhi for a while?” he asked with a touch of urgency. Farooq responded with studied nonchalance. “Not now. Let the terrorists fight it out and then we will see. If you need me, call me. I will come.”

Fernandes did not let go. He tasked the Indian High Commissioner in London Kuldip Nayyar to persuade Farooq to return to India at the earliest. Nayyar succeeded to an extent, and dates were announced, but they were soon cancelled.

Fernandes' efforts, ironically, were in direct conflict with the views of his own Cabinet colleagues who believed that Farooq's 'incompetence and unpopularity' had made him irrelevant in the Valley. Commerce Minister Arun Nehru, who was instrumental in unseating Farooq as CM in 1983, was forthright in his comments. "The man has been away for three months," he said dismissively, "He's clearly not interested, and if you have to do anything, you have to do it upfront and not through the backdoor." Farooq's performance as Chief Minister weighed heavily on his mind together with his broken relationship with the people. "Sending him to the Valley will be like showing a red rag to the bull," he said.

Differences in the V.P. Singh government notwithstanding, the main opposition, the Congress, also backed Farooq. Party spokesman M.J. Akbar was in touch with the former Chief Minister because he 'was the only Kashmiri who could deliver'. Farooq's ally in the tarnished 1987 election still had hopes that Farooq could be instrumental in bringing peace to the Valley.

Simultaneous to Fernandes' effort to reinstall Farooq were the efforts of Home Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed in the opposite direction. He initiated talks with other Kashmiri leaders to form an interim government before the next Assembly elections that were due a year later. He tapped Congress leader Ghulam Rasool Kar, and others like Abdul Ghani Lone, and Piyare Lal Handoo to explore the possibility of government formation. He visited Srinagar six times every week to grab at emerging possibilities. Anyone, but Farooq Abdullah, was acceptable to him.

The V.P. Singh government fell on November 10, 1990. It was followed by the brief government of Chandra Shekhar and elections were announced once again. Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated during the campaign at a public meeting in Tamil Nadu. P.V. Narasimha Rao, a senior minister in Rajiv Gandhi's cabinet, became Prime Minister on June 21, 1991.

Farooq took his time to return to India, but when he did, he dived straight into the Delhi and Mumbai social circuit. He bought a red Maruti 1000 and drove it at breakneck speed to the biggest weddings of the 1991 summer season—of politician Akbar Ahmed Dumpy, business tycoon Anil Ambani and Supriya Pawar, daughter of Maharashtra politics strong man Sharad

Pawar. He regaled audiences at elite gatherings and private dinners with his dancing and singing skills. He was the toast of the tinsel town.

While Farooq Abdullah was busy elsewhere, Governor Gary Saxena had got down to business in the Valley. He introduced two strategic elements in the State's attempt to control militancy. The first was the Criminal Apprehension Technique, popularly referred to as CAT, in which detained militants were used to identify their accomplices. The procedure was to mask the militant, station him in a closed vehicle and ask him to identify other members of his group during a cordon-and-search operation. The CAT system was a watershed moment in the fight against terrorism. Many top militants were either arrested or killed through it. It broke the back of Kashmir militancy. Militant-led violence went into a free fall.

The second element was the focus on quick restoration of normalcy in areas hit by terror strikes. Security forces were instructed to restore traffic, remove debris, or other signs of the strike immediately so that the after-effect did not linger. "The tamasha of militants' bombings or killings has to end," he told the authors. "We have to clear the area quickly and let people get on with their lives."

He used his skills as a spy master with RAW to painstakingly rebuild the intelligence network in the State. The system had been completely vandalized by jihadi supporters within and outside the government. But with Saxena at the helm, a robust informer network was in place within a short time. He also refused to shift to Jammu during winter months and used them to establish a personal rapport with common people. Dressed in a bandgala suit with a karakul cap on his head, the diminutive officer spoke in chaste Urdu to reassure the people that normal life would be back in the Valley soon.

But as schools, shops and banks began to function, and the JKLF was emasculated, pedestrian traffic from Pakistan exploded to new heights. Scores of heavily armed militants crossed the border into Kashmir on a daily basis. They were pushed in by the Pakistan Army and the ISI to bolster numbers in pro-Pakistan groups, especially Hizb-ul-Mujahideen. Reinforced Hizb columns moved to the centre-stage with a series of

dramatic killings and sensational kidnappings, including that of two Israeli tourists and a senior officer of the Indian Oil Corporation.

“Pakistan has been using JKLF to fight our security forces, and they will continue to do so till JKLF is down to the last man. But they are now getting the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen to attack and take control,” Governor Saxena told the authors. “See, how the Al-Umer Mujahideen, the MJF, and Operation Balakote have launched high-profile actions. They, for instance, kidnapped two Swedes—Johan Jansson and Johan-Ole Loman—who were working at the Uri hydel power project. Similarly, the Al-Umer Mujahideen has started hitting political targets. Sheikh Sadiq, a cousin of former Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah; Ghulam Mohammed Bande, a National Conference activist who had organized the anti-Pakistan demonstrations in Srinagar; and Hisamud-din Bande, a former minister under G.M. Shah have been killed by them. Pakistan has started a high-intensity proxy war. Israeli Uzi machine guns, Chinese RPGs and all sort of high-tech weaponry is being deployed. I see desperation in their efforts.”

An estimated 5,000 militants from POK crossed into Kashmir during the summer of 1991. The cross-overs were often intercepted by the Indian Army. In Tangdhar, for example, an army patrol challenged a group of militants, and after a 72-hour long shoot-out, 73 militants were killed and 15 were arrested. On an average, major interceptions yielded a body count of at least 50 militants. They revealed the volume of movement from across the border. Furthermore, more than 1,200 AK-47s were recovered from the militants—enough to arm an entire army regiment. In the next few months, 4,000 Kalashnikovs, 260 machine guns, 1,000 mines, 1,500 revolvers and pistols, and a million rounds of ammunition were seized by the security forces. The catch could have armed two brigades of the army.

The heavy influx of men and material pointed to another round of blood-letting by Pakistan-sponsored terrorists. The most brazen strike by the terrorists was on the office of the Director General of Police on January 24, 1992. It signalled the beginning of Operation Professor. The top cop, J.N. Saxena, had barely begun his meeting with the BSF Inspector General Ashok Patel, CRPF Inspector General M.K. Singh, IG (Kashmir Range) V. Aievalli, and DIG (Kashmir Range) Rajan Bakshi to finalize security detail

for the culmination of BJP president Murli Manohar Joshi's Ekmata Yatra in Srinagar when a powerful blast rocked the conference room. Splinters of wood flew all around, the ceiling collapsed, and burning logs fell in heaps on the officers. Patel was the only one who was not knocked out. He managed to free his foot from the debris and raised an alarm.

The audacious attack was carried out by the JKLF as a rebuff to Murli Manohar Joshi's Ekmata Yatra to protest the spread of Islamic terrorism and reclaim Kashmir from Pakistan-sponsored jihadis. The 15,000 kilometres yatra was flagged off from India's southern-most point, Kanyakumari, and was to end at Lal Chowk in Srinagar with the unfurling of the national flag on January 26, India's Republic Day. Joshi was travelling with hundreds of his supporters, but when the yatra reached Punjab, it had been challenged by Sikh extremists. Four persons were killed and 27 others were wounded when they were pulled out of their bus and shot by the extremists on January 23.

Though Joshi boasted that he had more volunteers than the militants have bullets, the Punjab incident took the wind out of the BJP sails. There was a deep sense of fore-brooding when Joshi's entourage reached Jammu. The blast at the DGP's office a day later shattered the party's confidence completely.

JKLF also declared Joshi as a persona non grata and Srinagar turned into a virtual battleground. Incessant gun fire, rocket attacks and bomb explosions carried out by the terrorists rocked the city as the BJP top brass—Atal Behari Vajpayee, L.K. Advani, Vijaya Raje Scindia and others—got into a huddle in Jammu over the precarious security situation. In Srinagar, Javed Mir, JKLF commander-in-chief boasted, "Our mujahideens are in a state of preparedness. The curfew is a measure of our success. The entire nation's eyes are on Srinagar, not because of the yatra, but because of us."

Governor Gary Saxena tried to dissuade Joshi from proceeding further than Jammu. He told him and others bluntly, "We cannot assure your security if you travel by road to Srinagar. We will do our best, but you will have to take your chances." Even the handing over the national highway to the army would not guarantee their safe passage, he said. Ultimately, security concerns prevailed.

Narendra Modi, who was in charge of the yatra, went up to the waiting journalists and told them curtly, “From now on, you are on your own. If you can, reach Lal Chowk . . . we will see you there.”

But a public face-saving had to be devised to justify the change of plans. A couple of landslides had taken place near the Banihal tunnel. Officials told journalists that the road show had been halted because of the snapping of the road link between Jammu and Srinagar. A secret plan was, however, devised to take Joshi and a few others to Srinagar for the formal unfurling of the national flag.

The next morning, Joshi departed from Jammu amidst a shower of rose petals and chants of Vande Mataram and Jai Shri Ram. Five kilometres from Udhampur, the yatra was stopped by the district magistrate. Volunteers accompanying Joshi blocked the road in a show of protest. Modi told them to go back home. The yatra was over for them, too. Joshi was then taken in a helicopter to another location and subsequently flown in a BSF aircraft to Srinagar at night.

On the morning of January 26, Joshi and Modi, along with a handful of supporters, arrived at Lal Chowk in a police convoy. Joshi tried to unwrap the flag he had brought with him, but its stick broke into two. Another flag was hastily supplied by the BSF. The event lasted for precisely 12 minutes. Joshi was then hurriedly escorted to the airport for a flight to Jammu. The police were left to deal with the mess.

There were as many as 100 attacks on security forces in retaliation against the hush-hush ceremony in the week following Joshi’s departure. “We will recover the lost ground in a few weeks,” Governor Saxena said in a dour voice, and admitted that the blast at the police headquarters and the yatra had put the focus back on the prowess of the extremists to make the people fearful of them again. “The situation,” he said, “continues to be dangerous, at times even precarious, but we deal with it.”

There was also pressure on him to have political advisors to facilitate negotiations with militant organizations, but the moves did not fructify. Saxena wanted to stabilize the Valley before going for a dialogue.

Narasimha Rao deputed Telecom Minister Rajesh Pilot to Kashmir. Pilot was Rajiv Gandhi's trouble-shooter in the Valley. He was also close to Farooq and several other political leaders. The increased levels of terrorist activity pushed Pilot to initiate secret talks with JKLF leaders in jail and outside it. He hoped the JKLF would help take on the pro-Pakistan Hizb-ul-Mujahideen. Pilot's overtures conflicted with Gary Saxena's policy, but he pursued his line nevertheless. The talks were, however, aborted when details leaked out and JKLF faced public flak for selling out the azadi movement to Indian agents.

In early 1993, Rajesh Pilot was shifted from Telecom and appointed as Minister of State for Internal Security under Home Minister S.B. Chavan. He was now directly in charge of J&K, and he once again adopted the political option as his top priority. He also roped in Farooq Abdullah as his unofficial adviser on Kashmir affair. Farooq agreed to cooperate but placed a condition—he wanted Gary Saxena out of the Raj Bhawan.

Pilot flew to Srinagar for a three-day visit in February 1993 and made it known that he did not favour several policies of the Governor. While Saxena was going all out to neutralize violent elements in the Valley, Pilot said he would encourage extremists to take part in elections. The statement made it obvious that he was keen to get the same militants on board who were on the radar of security forces for their heinous acts of violence.

Pilot's mechanization, especially when they were in consultation with Farooq Abdullah, upset Saxena greatly. On March 12, newspapers reported Saxena had resigned. The Home Ministry did not contradict the news. Saxena's mind was made up. He quietly flew to Delhi and handed his resignation to Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao on March 13. "I do not wish to continue as Governor. I have done what I could to check subversive activities in Kashmir in my three years. I may be relieved of my duties," he said to Narasimha Rao.

Saxena's sudden departure created a constitutional crisis in J&K. The State had neither a Chief Minister nor a Governor. It was headless.

The piquant situation gave Pilot a free hand. General K.V. Krishna Rao (retd.) was reappointed as Governor. Gen. Krishna Rao was Governor of the

State for two years, 1989-90, when extremists had run riot and forced Kashmiri Pandits out of the Valley. Farooq Abdullah was then the Chief Minister. Gen. Rao had also approved Farooq's proposal to release 70-hard core terrorists, who later created mayhem in the State.

Though battle-hardened Gen. Rao had a reputation for a tough approach, it wilted during his first tenure. When he took over for the second time, he emphasized that he did not want to dictate terms. "I am a democrat, not a dictator."

Two Kashmir cadre IAS officers were also specially brought in to assist the Governor—Ashok Jaitley and Wajahat Habibullah. The former was Farooq Abdullah's blue-eyed bureaucrat who favoured the extreme liberal line on Kashmir. He was sympathetic towards various civil liberties groups that had access to local militants. But it was common knowledge that he was at loggerheads with the Chief Secretary Sheikh Ghulam Rasool. Habibullah was also a liberal who frowned on Jagmohan's handling of Kashmir. He was Rajiv Gandhi's favourite bureaucrat.

Pilot's coziness with Farooq did not go down well with the masses. Farooq was remembered as the person who hijacked the 1987 election through widespread rigging. So intense was the popular feeling against the Abdullahs that the grave of Sheikh Abdullah was guarded by a strong, well-armed contingent of police. It was feared that it would be vandalized by the angry population if it were left unguarded.

The public mood notwithstanding, Pilot took a leap of faith with Farooq and co-opted him again in the political process despite the ruinous crash of the political tie-up in 1986. Farooq made his position clear to Pilot. He was willing to guide the Centre's initiative to revive the political process, but the government should initiate dialogue with the extremists. He would not be directly involved. Pakistan would have to be brought into the picture too, he said, to ensure a long-term settlement of the Kashmir issue. "My role will be to normalize the situation as much as possible. NC will not take the lead before militancy is contained sufficiently. I will go once the administration is revitalized. The militants are out to kill me and I will risk neither my own life nor those of my workers." he said plainly.

Pilot went into action immediately. He reshuffled the bureaucracy, drew up plans for the State's rapid development and initiated discussions with leaders of opposition parties and jailed extremists like JKLF leader Yasin Malik. The response from Pak-backed ultras was swift. They shot dead two relatives of the J&K Pradesh Congress Committee President Ghulam Rasool Kar in Sopore. Union Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad's kin was also shot at and wounded.

Pilot's main pointsman, and one of the most respected JKLF leaders and cardiologist, Dr A.A. Guroo, was abducted and killed too. His body was thrown outside the police headquarters in Srinagar's Batmaloo area. It was a horrific personal warning to Pilot. The murder, interestingly, was carried out by Hizb-ul-Mujahideen gunman Zulqarnain. He was mysteriously released from police custody days before the killing.

In the following month, policemen revolted. Constable Reyaz Ahmed of the 11th battalion J&K Armed Police was returning to his post at the Hazratbal shrine after collecting his salary from the government treasury on April 21, 1993, when a terrorist struck at an Army patrol. In the exchange of fire, six persons, including Reyaz, were killed.

The family of the constable said that he was not killed in the cross-fire. He was instead taken into custody by the State police and tortured to death. They blamed the Senior Superintendent of Police, K. Rajendran, for the high-handedness and demanded his arrest. Within a couple of days, the resentment of the constabulary against the State administration spread like wildfire. Hundreds of policemen, armed with their service weapons, came out on the roads and raised slogans against the police top brass. They also occupied the police control room, and manhandled the DGP.

Later in the week, they marched to the office of the United Nations Military Observers Group in India and Pakistan to hand over a memorandum against 'state terrorism'. They raised slogans like Aadhi roti khayenge, Kashmir ko azad karayenge (We will liberate Kashmir even if we have to eat half a bread). The political tone of the slogans triggered alarm bells in Delhi.

The unprecedented defiance by men of a disciplined force revealed the complete breakdown of trust between the officers and men, infiltration of

sympathizers of pro Pakistan elements in the police and the lack of governmental will to tackle the emerging situations. Kashmir, it seemed, was on the verge of being taken over by the terrorists of JKLF and Hizb-ul-Mujahideen. Swift action to regain the control was necessary.

Army and paramilitary forces began Operation Police Control Room at 4 a.m. on April 28, 1993. They used two armoured personnel carriers to break the outer wall and storm the building. By 4.30 a.m., the 1,000-odd personnel of the Jammu & Kashmir Armed Police surrendered without a fight.

Chapter

21

Prime Minister Narasimha Rao had barely said Kashmir would be soon restored to its status of paradise on earth when all hell broke loose in Srinagar.

It started during an early evening on October 15, 1993. The Inspector General of Police, Kashmir range, A.K. Suri, was informed by a member of the Muslim Auqaf Trust that some militants had tried to break the lock of the strong room housing the Holy Relic of Prophet Muhammad in Hazratbal shrine. The Trust is the custodian of the shrine as well as the Moi-e-Muqqadas.

Suri hustled to inform the Security Advisor to the Governor, Lt. Gen. M.A. Zaki, and the BSF immediately cordoned off the shrine with militants and devotees still inside. The siege of Hazratbal had begun—a battle of wits between the government and the terrorists.

Prime Minister Rao was busy in finalizing the list of candidates for Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections when the news of the encirclement of Hazratbal was conveyed to him. He did not respond to it with concern. Governor Krishna Rao, on his part, did not press for an urgent conversation with the Prime Minister. He waited for the Prime Minister to call him instead at his convenience. He or his office also did not alert the Home Ministry on the serious development.

Home Secretary N.N. Vohra was briefed by intelligence agencies during the night, hours after the siege started. He called the Governor the next day.

Gen. Rao refused to take the call. The Governor spoke to the Prime Minister alone, no one else, he was told.

Gen. Rao managed to speak to Narasimha Rao 24 hours after the take-over of Hazratbal shrine by terrorists. Rao listened to Krishna Rao and said nothing.

Minister of State for Internal Security Rajesh Pilot was not informed about the siege either. He was in Assam to sort out the Bodoland issue. He got to know of it when a newspaper reporter mentioned it in Guwahati. He was concerned, but he did not pick up the phone to speak to the Governor.

Krishna Rao had switched off from Rajesh Pilot after he found favour with fellow Andhraite Narasimha Rao. Pilot was cut up with the snub. After all, he had lobbied for Krishna Rao's reappointment as Governor. Their relationship ended completely when the issue of appointing a new Director General of Police came up. B.S. Bedi was retiring, Pilot wanted anti-terrorism expert and Punjab veteran K.P.S. Gill to take over. He got Gill's appointment cleared from the Prime Minister, but Krishna Rao pre-empted the appointment by announcing M.N. Sabharwal as DGP, ironically, a few hours before the Hazratbal crisis erupted. Pilot then distanced himself from the situation in Srinagar.

Governor Rao was frank about his differences with Pilot, and the fact he had a direct line with the Prime Minister. "To say that differences don't exist would be wrong . . . I deal with the person in charge, and now Mr. Chavan is in charge. In fact, the Prime Minister is dealing with Kashmir . . . I don't know about Delhi but I do know that the Prime Minister has a Kashmir policy, so I keep in touch with him directly . . . I know from the time when I was army chief and Mrs Gandhi was Prime Minister, that prime ministers themselves handle Kashmir," he said.

"I'm not used to interference. As advisors, I wanted top-class IAS officers with proven merit and Muslims. But Delhi could not find them even though I had given the names. In the case of the DGP, too, I wanted a Muslim and I told them that if I don't get one, I will decide on one."*

Home Minister, and Pilot's senior minister, S.B. Chavan, saw space for himself in the stand-off between his junior and the Governor. Chavan had earlier scuttled Pilot's attempts to reach out to terror groups to broker a long-term political solution. Though the moves were sanctioned by Prime Minister Rao, Chavan launched his own manoeuvres to nullify Pilot's effort. The junior minister went into a sulk and withdrew himself from the process.

Apart from snubbing Pilot, Chavan did not involve himself in the Srinagar crisis. He instead fired his first salvo in the realm of foreign affairs. Chavan accused America of instigating Pakistan into fostering trouble in Kashmir. It created a piquant situation for the government. It hurriedly explained the remarks to the US administration.

The bickering in Delhi was compounded by the one in Kashmir. Gen. Rao was not keen on his security advisor Gen. Zaki. He was brought back by Pilot to create a unified command of security forces—Army, BSF, ITBP, CRPF, J&K Police—that were deployed in the State. Gen. Zaki soon developed differences with the army and the civil administration. In fact, the entire command structure from Srinagar to Delhi was more unified in its disarray than in command.

Back in Srinagar, as soon as the news of reported tampering of locks came in, the police officials suggested to Gen. Zaki to verify it before any action was initiated on it. A senior Trust member was, therefore, summoned for its verification. The member said he had not personally seen the tampering, but the constable on guard duty had informed him that two locks of the outer door had been changed by the terrorists.

The Holy Relic was housed in a chamber located behind two doors secured by seven locks. Two keys were needed to open each lock. One of these keys was with the Muslim Auqaf Trust, and the other was in the custody of the guards posted in the mosque premises. There was, thus, only a remote chance that the terrorists would be able to break in and seize the Relic.

Officials also suggested that the Imam, high priests, prominent citizens and officials should visit Hazratbal to verify the status of the Holy Relic. Their

report would have public credibility and provide the ground for action or lack of it to the government.

Gen. Zaki left for the Raj Bhawan in a hurry before the Trust member could arrive. He returned to announce that the Army would take over the encirclement of Hazratbal from the BSF at dawn on October 16. Strangely, the Army was withdrawn in April from the shrine despite several exchanges of fire with the terrorists inside it. The BSF was brought in its place. It was being replaced by the Army yet again.

Farooq Abdullah was in Brussels when the crisis broke out. The Socialist Group of the European Parliament was hosting a two-day conference on Kashmir on October 18 and 19, 1993. Though the conference was organized by a political group and was not connected to the European Parliament, it was initially billed as a presentation by the 'Prime Minister of Kashmir' on the troubled Indian state. India protested his attendance and the conference was first reduced to a seminar, and then to a closed-door meeting of 25 delegates.

India was represented at the controversial meeting by George Fernandes (who was not a minister at that time but vice president of the Janata Dal); Farooq Abdullah; Bhim Singh of the Jammu and Kashmir Panther's Party; Mr Bahal, special representative of Vishwanath Pratap Singh; and Dr K.N. Pandita of Friends of Kashmir.

Sardar Abdul Qayyum Khan, Prime Minister of Azad Kashmir; Iftikhar Ahmed, special representative of Benazir Bhutto; Choudhry Munawar Hussain, president, Pakistan People's Party, UK; were also part of the closed-door meeting that was headlined by JKLF chairman Amanullah Khan, described by The Daily Telegraph, London, as 'one of the world's most wanted terrorists'. JKLF leaders Shabir Siddiqui from the UK and Raja Muzaffar Khan from Pakistan Occupied Kashmir were also present.

India had issued an Interpol warrant against Amanullah Khan for the brutal murder of Kashmir University Vice-Chancellor Mushir-ul-Haq in 1991. He was accused of the murder as the key conspirator. Khan was aware of the warrant, but he flew out of Pakistan to attend the conference. India put pressure on the Belgian government and Amanullah Khan was arrested on

the night of October 18. He was driving to a meeting of the socialist group when he was intercepted. He was subsequently remanded to police custody for 21 days at Saint-Gilles prison.

Pakistan foreign ministry lodged a strong protest against the arrest. India insisted Khan should be extradited to face trial for murder. The Socialist Group passed a resolution condemning Khan's arrest and demanded his release. The Belgian government assured Pakistan that the JKLF chief would not be handed over to India. Hectic diplomatic discussions went on for days. Ultimately, Amanullah Khan flew home to Muzaffarabad. The Hazratbal crisis and the intriguing goings-on in Brussels put India on the back foot. The issue of violation of human rights in Kashmir once again got a major global platform.

The response to the occupation of Hazratbal shrine by terrorists belonging mainly to the JKLF and Operation Balakote was handicapped by the clamour of human rights activists. The Army firmly wanted that water, power, and food supply should be cut off in order to force a surrender. Civil authorities, led by Srinagar Divisional Commissioner Wajahat Habibullah, ignored the advice. Huge pots of food were sent every day into the shrine for the terrorists and 170 civilian hostages. Clear orders were given to army not to fire towards the shrine even if there was grave provocation from the terrorists.

Though the civil administration was extra cautious about the human rights of the occupants of Hazratbal, they were still wary of involving themselves in direct negotiations with the terrorists. The Governor's office asked Chief Secretary Sheikh Ghulam Rasool to appear on television and appeal to the terrorists to free civilians in their captivity. Rasool refused to comply. Police officers of all ranks also declined to accompany Inspector General of Police A.K. Suri to the entry point of the mosque for negotiations with the terrorists. Caught in the mess of multiple opinions and several still-born initiatives, the Army watched helplessly from their bunkers as a murky sea of confusion lapped around it.

Administration's lackadaisical attitude agitated the people. On October 22, a large crowd started a march towards the shrine from Bijbehara, a town on the outskirts of Srinagar, to protest the siege. A clash with security forces

ensured. The BSF claimed that they were fired upon by the protestors and they responded in self-defence. But as the dust cleared in Bijbehara, 37 persons lay dead and 70 others were reported injured. The clash ignited another crisis.

Hurriyat Conference leaders—Professor Abdul Ghani, S.A.S. Geelani, Maulana Abbas Ansari and Abdul Ghani Lone—took advantage of the incident to raise an anti-India outcry. “It is a massacre of innocent Kashmiris by Indian forces,” they claimed, “. . . a pre-planned action to throttle the voice of the people. But we will not be browbeaten by this strong-arm tactic . . . We will fight on irrespective of how many of us are martyred and force the Government of India to negotiate Kashmir’s liberation.”

The tense Hazratbal siege and the attendant hysterical politics continued for 32 days, and ended on November 16, 1993. During this time, the options before the government circled back to a face-saving solution. All the 40-odd terrorists inside the shrine were allowed to cross the Indo-Pak border safely. The hard option of a military strike against the occupiers never came into play, though the crack commando team was ready to take on the occupants of the shrine in a daring 42-second operation. “Many things can happen on the ground during the 42 seconds. The risk is too big,” Narasimha Rao reportedly told the security top brass in Delhi, and ruled it out. He couldn’t take the chance with elections in the Hindi heartland at hand. Political equations were more important to him than security needs.

Rao was simultaneously looking ahead in his own political way. He was preparing a plan for holding elections in J&K despite the grave terror threat and the embarrassing siege of Hazratbal. He was keen to revive the political process, and involve Farooq Abdullah directly in it.

Farooq flew back to New Delhi after almost 10 months on foreign shores. The last time he was in India, he had tied up with Pilot to get Gary Saxena replaced with Krishna Rao as Governor. But within days, he had hastily returned to the UK. The threat of terrorists was far too real.

With Farooq back, Narasimha Rao’s administration asked him to assess the ground situation in the Valley for holding elections in the near future. There

were elements in the JKLF, he was told, who could be persuaded to take part in the hustings. Efforts were also made to reach out to other formations, including the separatist Hurriyat Conference, and arrive at an understanding.

In a parallel move, security bosses galvanized Kuka Parray and other renegade government-sponsored ultras to take on pro-Pak outfits like Hizb-ul-Mujahideen. Kuka, alias Mohammad Yusuf Parray, was a folk singer who joined JKLF in 1990. He surrendered before the Army in 1994 and later founded Ikhwan-ul-Muslimoom, a 250-member pro-India militia. A number of high-profile terrorists were eliminated by his militia. The actions caused a relative lull in terrorist activity. Parray was assured by the government that he would have a role in upcoming elections.

Farooq took up the challenge to revive the political process through a series of deft political moves. Revival of National Conference at the grassroots was a long process. He could, however, quickly offer an alternative discourse to people fed up with the continuous cycle of violence unleashed by 'jihadis, the azadis and the faujis'.

Farooq, therefore, reverted to his old demand of granting pre-1953 status to J&K, wherein the State was fully autonomous in all matters, save defence, communication and external affairs. Autonomy was an emotive issue with Kashmiris. It was also irrevocably linked to Sheikh Abdullah, the legendary Sher-e-Kashmir. But, public voices about Farooq's 'misrule', 'irrelevance' and how he 'fled' leaving the people to be lashed by jihadi terrorism were strident. They echoed loud and clear in the Valley.

Farooq adopted a combative stand on these issues. An interview with India Today fully captured his anger, frustration and dogged determination to stage a comeback. He blamed 'India' for his acts of omission and commission, and thereby tried to erase the perception that he was an 'agent of Delhi'.

"Farooq Abdullah is not as useless as you Indians have made him look," he thundered at the interviewer. "You can say whatever you like. When Farooq Abdullah comes out to fight, you will not know in which corner to hide. It is you people, who have drummed in to the world that Farooq Abdullah

perpetrated corruption. Farooq Abdullah neither depends on the media, nor on your capabilities of placing him on the throne. He doesn't want any throne. I want my people to survive the onslaught. That's all. Nothing more, nothing less . . . ”

He continued the tirade, “Four years ago, I did not leave. I was made to leave, otherwise I would have met the same fate as Mirwaiz Farooq and they would have buried me. I am not ready for burial as yet. I will bury others before I go.”

Farooq said he utilized the time gainfully while living on foreign shores, “I think I've seen what the situation in the world is. I also feel that the Government of India is finally serious about doing something. The situation is very grave. It's about time we got on with our job. The American President is talking of the independence of Kashmir, and Pakistan of a nuclear war. The scenario that is developing around us is serious—we have to take note of it and do something urgently. I don't want a situation like that of Afghanistan. I have seen the destruction of Afghanistan. I have seen a position where the land has disappeared, where the people have disappeared. Afghans are killing Afghans, and I don't want that to happen in my State. If we don't act now, it'll be too late . . . People want peace. The majority of the people are sick and tired of militancy. They want a viable solution.”

“So, what role do you see for yourself in Kashmir,” the interviewer asked.

“Are you going to get me murdered and my party members murdered by asking this question?” Farooq shot back incredulously. “I don't know what role I see for myself as yet. I've just come back . . . There is total alienation but, I still say, despite that alienation, we have not reached the point of no return. We can still turn the clock around.”

“But you chose Europe over Kashmir,” the interviewer interjected again.

“I didn't do a bad job by going back to Europe, did I? I went to the United Nations and to Vienna. I defended my nation. What more do you expect from me? Isn't that a political process? Don't you think I belong to India? Kashmir is not out of India. A soldier has to work on many fronts. Then I

had to work at that front. When I find this front ready, you will not find me lacking. I shall be with my Patton tank in the front. Insha'Allah (God willing), the time is coming.”

The rest of the interview was as follows:

Q. How do you plan to tackle the militants who are dead set against you?

A. Why are they against me?

Q. Because they think you rigged an election and you headed an administration that was corrupt.

A. (Raising his voice) Are those people not corrupt? Are those militants not raping my mothers and my sisters and taking money from them? Are they not, at this time, building homes, beyond their capacities? Are they not raping government land? (Screaming by now) Who are you calling corrupt? Rigged election, my foot. I don't believe it. Why did they not go to the Election Commission and complain?

Q. You seriously believe the election was not rigged?

A. You accept all other elections as unriggered? All of you make the 1987 election out to be the turning point. It is India that is responsible for what has happened in Kashmir and not Farooq Abdullah. They betrayed my father in 1953. They betrayed my father in 1975. They betrayed me in 1984. They are responsible, not Farooq Abdullah.

Q. The people feel let down, let down by Farooq Abdullah.

A. We all feel let down. I feel let down, the people feel let down. We have to pull them out. Depression doesn't last forever. You have to give pills for depression.

Q. For the last four years, you were not interested in fighting them.

A. I was enjoying myself. With nations, four years don't make a damn difference.

Q. Why the sudden urge to fight?

A. Generals choose the time and place. I'm a General. I will choose my time and place. And my party workers will become active when the General's bugle sounds. . . . Our enemies want us dead but the NC will not die for a million years. You wouldn't be talking to me if I were irrelevant. You know how relevant we are and without us you have no one else. I bet on this. You have no other organization more nationalistic than the NC.

Q. What do you think were your mistakes?

A. (Hisses) Don't ask me to list them. Your columns have written about them for a long time. One day, I will teach all of you a lesson when I'm back at the front and speaking from Srinagar with this voice. All of you will shake in your boots.*

Clearly, Farooq was back in business and even as he fumed at India, he joined Government of India's efforts at UN Human Rights Commission meeting in Vienna in March 1994. Pakistan had moved a resolution condemning India for rights' violation in Kashmir. In response, Prime Minister Rao assembled a formidable team to represent the country's view point and defeat Pakistan's gross misrepresentation of facts on the ground. The high-powered team included Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, Foreign Minister Dinesh Singh, his deputy Salman Khursheed, and six experienced Indian Ambassadors who have had exposure to the UN and other major global powers.

The team was headed by BJP leader and former External Affairs Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Farooq Abdullah. Inclusion of the two gave it an added punch, more so when Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto especially flew in to be present at the crucial conference.

The big outcome of the conference was India's success in garnering support from Islamic countries. Iran led from the front when it called upon Pakistan to drop the resolution as soon as discussions on the move started. By evening, Pakistan was forced to drop the resolution altogether.

The star of the show was Farooq Abdullah. He represented the authentic voice of Kashmir and was belligerent in defending the country. Attiya Inayatullah, former Pakistan Minister, who claimed to represent Kashmiri Muslims through the World Muslim Congress, was truly stumped by Farooq. He challenged the former PM to speak to him in Kashmiri. Inayatullah backtracked immediately. Farooq beamed at the fall of an important Pakistan wicket.

Farooq made his presence felt in more ways than one. Besides demolishing Pakistan allegations on the Kashmir situation, he kept the spirits of the Indian camp high with his witty one-liners and easy banter. At one point, he told a high-ranking Pakistan official, “Don’t you worry about Kashmir. We will sort it out soon and then you come and play a round of golf with me. We have the most beautiful course in the world.”

The dropping of the resolution at the UN meet was a big victory for India against Pakistan shenanigans at international fora. Though Farooq played his part in it with due diligence as well as aplomb, Vajpayee was quick to point out that it was one thing to be on one forum together as Indians on a national cause, but if the Centre tried to foist Farooq on Kashmir, they wouldn’t accept that. They hadn’t accepted the Centre’s Kashmir policy.

Vajpayee’s dampener notwithstanding, Narasimha Rao continued to look towards J&K’s ebullient former Chief Minister as his best bet in the State.*

*Baweja, Harinder. “Militants are just misguided youth: General K.V. Krishna Rao.” India Today, 1993. Available at:
<https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/19931115-militants-are-just-misguided-youth-general-kv-krishna-rao-811804-1993-11-14>

*Haweja, Harinder. “The only thing we want is the autonomy that Kashmir had must be restored.” India Today, 1994. Available at:
<https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/interview/story/19940215-the-only->

thing-we-want-is-the-autonomy-that-kashmir-had-must-be-restored-says-
farooq-abdullah-808812-1994-02-14

*Baweja, Harinder. "Farooq Abdullah returns to Jammu and Kashmir in an effort to revive political process." India Today, 1994. Available at:
<https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19940131-farooq-abdullah-returns-to-jammu-and-kashmir-with-centre-covert-consent-808733-1999-11-29>

Chapter

22

Farooq Abdullah and Narasimha Rao placed great hopes on each other. Farooq was sure he can persuade Rao to grant substantive autonomy to J&K to fulfil the azadi aspirations of the people within the framework of Indian Constitution. The concessions were vital, he argued, for the political process to be meaningful for the masses that were fed up with insurgency and counter insurgency gunfire.

Rao, on his part, tapped other stakeholders in the Valley to seek out a solution acceptable at the national level. The main opposition party, the BJP, had upped the ante on the Centre's feeble attempts to counter anti-national forces in Kashmir. It wanted a strong response from Government of India. The Congress was divided on the usefulness of talking to Farooq or the JKLF. Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, who rejoined the party after his short-lived foray into National Front politics, was dead against any relationship with National Conference.

Rajesh Pilot opened channels with the JKLF leadership based in Kashmir at Rao's bidding. Yasin Malik and others were not averse to rejoin over-ground politics if the Centre gave them concessions on autonomy. The Hurriyat Conference was in the loop too. Several of its leaders visited New Delhi for 'frank' talks with the government.

Rao was of the view that despite the setback in Charar-e-Sharief, where Hizbul terrorist Mast Gul had burnt down the Holy Sufi shrine in a brazen defiance of state power in May 1995, elections could be organized in Kashmir before Parliamentary poll in May 1996 with Farooq as the main

man. A possible electoral understanding with the NC was also on his mind since the Congress was in no position to motivate the people at grassroot level on its own. Its two key men, the Mufti and Ghulam Nabi Azad, did not have the political prowess to swing the State elections in favour of the Congress.

Rao started serious discussions with Farooq on restoring autonomy to the strife-torn state in October, 1995. He encouraged Farooq to lay out the parameters which met the political aspirations of the people.

Farooq made a strong case for strengthening Article 370 of the Constitution which guaranteed autonomy to Kashmir in 1953, but was substantially diluted later. He also wanted the restoration of the title Sadar-e-Riyasat for Governor and Wazir-e-Azam for Chief Minister. The reversion to the old titles, he felt, would re-establish the strong emotional connect with the people. The titles, he said, should be restored via a Presidential Order. The Order should, Abdullah argued, also restore some pre-1953 laws that ensured autonomy under the Indian Constitution.

The National Conference prepared a seven-page note that detailed the mechanism through which various laws that were promulgated after 1953 could be reversed. Narasimha Rao and Farooq negotiated for three days before the Prime Minister's departure to Burkina Faso en-route to G-15 Summit in Buenos Aires. Rao even delayed his departure on November 2, 1995, by two hours in order to give shape to the autonomy proposal. He, however, held his hand from immediately formalizing them.

The Centre's draft was presented to Farooq as Rao drove to the airport. He rejected it outright. Rao considered the rejection on boarding the aircraft, and as the door closed, he asked it to be opened again. He called Ghulam Nabi Azad, directed him to meet Farooq once more, and find a solution that did not force the Centre's hand at the current moment. Serious objections raised by the Law Ministry to turning the clock back to 1952 could not be trashed overnight, he told Azad. After a thoughtful pause, he put the question on his mind into words, "Is Farooq Abdullah the only option?" Azad looked away.

Farooq was livid at Rao's rejection. It was a betrayal, he ranted. Rao had wasted his time.

On November 4, the Prime Minister made the only television broadcast ever made on a domestic issue from foreign shores in a desperate bid to placate Kashmir. He said that the 'sky was the limit' on the autonomy issue and that 'there would be no objection to the change of the nomenclature of Governor and Chief Minister to Sadar-e-Riyasat and Wazir-e-Azam'. He did not mention issuing a Presidential Order in this regard. It was Farooq's key demand.

Farooq met Rao when he returned from his foreign trip and asked him about the truncated package. Rao said, "Once in government, the forum of the Assembly should be used to undo the erosions (post-1953)." It was clear that Rao would go no further, though he hoped his 'sky is the limit' announcement would propel the people towards the electoral process.

Farooq's rejection of Rao's overtures shored up his stock in the Valley. His refusal to take part in elections without the restoration of pre-1953 status boosted his credibility that lay in the dark shallows for almost nine years. Farooq Abdullah was back in a commanding position.

Election to the Lok Sabha was held in April–May 1996. National Conference boycotted the elections. Congress won four of the six seats in the State, while the BJP and the Janata Dal won one each. Overall, the electorate returned a hung Parliament. The ruling Congress won 140 seats, while the BJP emerged with a tally of 161 MPs. BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee, leader of the largest party, took oath as Prime Minister on May 16. However, his government lasted only for 13 days. A United Front was quickly cobbled together and H.D. Deve Gowda became the consensus PM for the next 11 months.

Farooq was active in the non-Congress and non-BJP politics. As a result, NC's Saifuddin Soz became a Cabinet Minister for Environment and Forest. The United Front promised J&K maximum autonomy as it moved towards holding elections in the State, which were in the works since 1994. Though Gowda, like Narasimha Rao, did not formalize any autonomy measures that were put on the table by Farooq again, the 'maximum autonomy' assurance

was good enough now to pitch autonomy over azadi, ballot over bullet, bread and butter over Kashmir Banega Pakistan (Kashmir will become Pakistan).

Farooq explained the difference between the two situations in an interview with *The Week* (September 8, 1996), “The Congress always stands for a strong Centre and weak States. But the United Front stands for a strong Centre and equally strong States . . . I feel there is a change in the attitude of the Central government. Deve Gowda is committed to implementing the federalism of the United Front, whereas Narasimha Rao was committed to the centralism of the Congress.”

On the autonomy issue—of reverting to pre-1953 status—Farooq constructed an elaborate plan with deadlines. “The moment we assume office, we will appoint a commission of eminent public men from all over India to come forward with proposals to give autonomy to Kashmir, Jammu and Ladakh. Within six months, they will give recommendations and we will ask the people to give their comments on it. After that, within three months concrete proposals will be given to the Assembly, and later, there will be a referendum. Regarding the autonomy of the State, the new government will immediately start negotiating with the Centre and it depends on the Centre how soon we will get our autonomy.”

On the political side, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed was Farooq’s bug bear once more. He was clear that he would have no truck with Congress if he had to deal with Mufti. “The Mufti,” he said angrily, “is a plant of the Hurriyat in the Janata Dal and now Congress. He is the man responsible for the present mess in J&K. In 1986, he hated us so much that he created the Muslim United Front which fanned anti-national feelings. MUF paved the way for the Hurriyat. In 1989-90, he ensured that a democratically elected government was forced to quit office. He wanted to finish National Conference and for that he was willing to do anything and collaborate with anyone. Even now he is a part of the Hurriyat. That is why he is vociferously arguing for the Hurriyat to be brought into the picture. It is a tragedy that the ex-Home Minister of India is supported by pro-Pakistan groups.”

Farooq was stoic about the terrorists' threat to his person during the Assembly elections. "I am the number one on Pakistan's hit list. They sent killer squads to liquidate me and these squads are here despite the Army vigil . . . I have left my security to God. I hope I will come out of this campaign alive. If I were to die," he paused for effect, "my epitaph will be 'Here lies an Indian.' It is only the National Conference which has stood between Pakistan and Kashmir."

The conditions, in fact, were perfect for Farooq to position himself in the political gambit. Kuka Parray had dealt a severe blow to Pakistan-sponsored terrorism through his bullet-for-bullet approach; criminalization of militants had eroded their image as saviours and heroes, while the Hurriyat Conference was on the sidelines because of its poll boycott call. Farooq's substantive autonomy poll plank against the azadi slogan suddenly found takers in the Valley. There was hope once again and enthusiasm about elections was palpable for the first time after more than a decade.

In another deft political move, Farooq refused offers from national parties, including the Janata Dal and the Congress, to align with them. He was convinced that going alone as a regional party was the only way if he were to revive Kashmiriyat and connect the identity of the NC with Kashmir. As a consequence, allegations of the NC being a tool or agent of New Delhi would also be wiped out.

Farooq Abdullah swept the September-October 1996 Assembly elections and returned as the Chief Minister once again. It was a heady win—National Conference won 57 of the 87 seats; a far better result than in 1986, with a voter turnout of about 54 per cent, even though the fear of the terrorists was all pervasive. The turnaround was remarkable—Farooq had dared and won. He was sworn in on October 9, 1996, for the third time.

"I am Kashmiri; it's my identity—in that we have to be a part of the nation. I am part of the State. And a part of India as well. We cannot isolate ourselves, live in our shell. We have already done it for a long period of time. I can see the federal structure that is becoming a reality in the country. States across India are coming into their own. I do not bother about what some section in Kashmir feels. This dual attitude of being with India and yet keeping a distance will never help us. I have to be part of India.

Otherwise, how am I going to take my State forward? Even if there is a BJP government in New Delhi, we will join hands with it,” he said to the authors emphatically after the victory.

He reclined in his chair and smiled. “The Kashmiris’ love affair with Pakistan is over. There wasn’t any love from them, only loot and rape. The ordinary Kashmiri is now convinced about their dastardly intentions. They will not be forgiven. Pakistan ka ab janaza Kashmir mein nikalega (Kashmir will be Pakistan’s funeral).

Farooq’s analysis of the situation was part true and part rhetoric. Coalition politics had become the order of the day since 1990. The overwhelming shadow of Congress rule had dissipated. He could, therefore, set his terms, make political adjustments in the federal setting, and declare, “We have to be a part of the nation.”

Terrorism persisted with a vengeance. When Farooq scheduled a visit to his father Sheikh Abdullah’s grave in Srinagar after taking over as CM, a bomb went off at the site minutes before his arrival. The message to the CM was clear and direct: ISI-backed terrorism was alive and well in the Valley. ‘Pakistan ka janaza’ (Pakistan’s funeral) would have to wait another day.

Chapter

23

“Politics is easy. Give up your real-estate job, bring home a suitcase full of designer suits, invoke your famous father’s name repeatedly, and everything will be just fine. Omar Abdullah did just that. Except, he found—at his first public meeting—that everything was not just fine. At Charar-e-Sharief, people were reluctant to even accord him the normal courtesy of a salaam. But Omar, who has inherited powerful political genes, did not falter,” India Today wrote about the ‘son rise’ in the Valley during 1998 Lok Sabha elections.

“‘My father told me to even greet enemies and since we are not enemies, I greet you again.’ This time he elicits a response. Only 28, the young Kashmiri is his target. ‘Give me your vote and I shall solve all your employment problems.’ It sounds trite. Perhaps that strikes him too, for he adds, ‘I am standing in front of the shrine so I won’t tell you lies,’” the report added.

Farooq Abdullah claimed he tried his best to dissuade his only son, Omar, from joining politics for two reasons—the first, and the most vital, was Omar’s personal safety given the free run of the gun in the State. The second was Farooq’s perception that his son was too much of a good boy to be in bad politics. Language was also a handicap. Omar could speak Kashmiri but not as a local.

Omar was born in Rochford, Essex, United Kingdom, on March 10, 1970, as the eldest of Farooq and Mollie’s four children. “Mollie walked in from the hospital with our new born and all I said was I have a (golf) match to

play, and walked off . . . But then that is me . . . I was into golf that much,” confessed Farooq.

Omar spent nearly all of his growing up years outside Kashmir. Mollie was devoted to her children and strove to ensure that they had a ‘normal’ upbringing. She personally brewed the morning tea and brought the tray to her children in their room. She also kept them away from Farooq’s hangers on. She did not want them to be spoilt silly.

Though Omar was a diligent student in lower school, Burn Hall School, Sonwar, Srinagar, teachers often gave him special treatment. Omar once innocently told his mother that a school teacher had given him the important questions that may be asked at the annual examinations. Mollie promptly pulled up the teacher, and told Farooq that she had decided to send him away from such influences. Omar was subsequently admitted to country’s top boarding school—Lawrence School, Sanawar, in Himachal Pradesh. The wards of the rich and the famous had passed through its portals for over a century. He stayed at Lawrence for eight years.

“I was lucky to study in one of the most gorgeous schools,” Omar exulted at a meeting of Lawrence School alumni years later. The school too prided itself that Omar was its alumnus. After all, he had been the school’s head boy! Rajesh Puri, school’s maths teacher, thought Omar was ‘one of the brightest boys, and very good at mathematics’, though Omar modestly described himself as a ‘backbencher’. He graduated from the school in 1987.

More than academic diligence, young Omar was known for his humility, sense of purpose and discipline. He made friends but was not an extrovert. He rather preferred to assimilate the school experience in himself. “Never give in was my school’s motto,” he said when he was asked why he was contesting from Ganderbal constituency after being rejected by the constituents in an earlier Assembly election. “The decision to go back and stand from Ganderbal was an emotional rather than a practical one. Perhaps I had my school motto ‘Never Give In’ at the back of my mind. It was a lot of hard work because it is doubly difficult to win back a constituency you have already lost from. But I was determined to win,” he said. He won handsomely the second time around.

Grandfather Sheikh Abdullah doted on his grandson. The Sheikh died when Omar was just 12 years old, but Omar held on to the memories of the growing up years. The Sheikh was his hero, and he treasured memories of family outings and picnics with him. Whenever they went out, Omar rode in the jeep of his grandfather's motorcade. The big moment for him was when he pressed the button of the siren fitted on the vehicle. He asked the Sheikh's permission to do so every time. "Sometimes he would say no and I couldn't press it. It was devastating," Omar said.

Omar moved from Lawrence to Sydenham College, Mumbai, to study commerce. Nationalist Congress Party Chief Sharad Pawar put him up in his house during the tenure of the course. Priyadarshini Raje Scindia, wife of Congress minister Jyotiraditya Scindia and daughter-in-law of Congress heavyweight Madhav Rao Scindia, became his rakhi-sister because of Farooq's close ties with her parents, the Gaekwads.

Omar, in fact, was truly a man embraced by diversity—Kashmir, the UK, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi, Mumbai, etc., were part of his young experience. This was besides the fact that his father was a Muslim and his mother was a Christian.

He joined The Oberoi Hotels after his graduation where he met Payal Nath, daughter of Major General Ram Nath. The two clicked instantly and Omar got home a Hindu wife on September 1, 1994.

Omar was 28 when he decided to quit corporate life at ITC Global Holdings, a premier real estate company, and join politics. "I wanted to do more than what was available there," he told the authors. "My father wasn't very happy with my decision because he knew what politics could do to a person's life. But I knew what I wanted. I had my grandfather's legacy, and my father's . . . I could build on that to make my own contribution," he said.

Though Omar was awkward during the February 1998 Lok Sabha elections from Srinagar constituency, he won the seat handsomely. The family's influence and his own honest, sincere demeanour ensured a comfortable victory for him.

However, the National Conference did not do too well in the other parts of the State. Besides Srinagar, NC won in Baramulla and Ladakh. Mufti Mohammad Sayeed of the Congress bagged Anantnag, while the BJP made an impressive showing in Jammu and Udhampur constituencies. At the national level, the mid-term poll returned a hung Parliament for the fourth successive time. It was the sum total of state-level verdicts. Farooq was proved right in his assessment of the political realities of the 1990s decade—the road to power was through political, regional and social alliances. The BJP benefitted the most from it. It broke the 25 per cent barrier in vote share on its own strength, and added another vital 6 per cent through the right alliances. The BJP, therefore, bagged 182 seats against Congress' 141. Atal Behari Vajpayee became the Prime Minister once again by cobbling together a coalition government backed by 272 of the 543 MPs—the exact half-way mark.

Farooq was quick to spot the emergence of majoritarian politics of the BJP on the national scene; he leaned Right.

Vajpayee began his term by flexing India's nuclear muscle. On May 11, 1998, India detonated five nuclear devices at the Army Testing Range in Pokhran. The tests conducted under the code name Operation Shakti, and declared to the world that India was now a full-fledged nuclear state. The BJP was euphoric. The explosions ensured that it occupied the nationalistic space in political discourse. It was an hour of triumph and pride, it said. The party Vice President Venkaiah Naidu went to the extent of describing those who questioned the nuclear tests as unpatriotic.

But the party's top leadership did not want the 'Hindu Bomb' tag to be attached to the achievement. Vajpayee told party workers, who descended on his residence to congratulate him, that 'no party or individual can take credit for the tests'. He also cancelled a public reception in his honour at Bangalore.

Home Minister L.K. Advani negated Pakistan's charge of building a 'Hindu Bomb' when he said, "The fact that Farooq Abdullah and Dr Abdul Kalam could be working for their country with the same patriotic dedication as any other Indian does not fit into the false framework of the two-nation theory on which Pakistan is based."

Farooq accompanied Vajpayee to Pokhran. "I am proud of Pokhran. I am proud to be Indian," he declared. He also affirmed the BJP's Ayodhya agenda, "Lord Ram is not the God of the Hindus alone. He is the God of the entire world and so is the lord of Farooq Abdullah." He also began singing bhajans during public functions.

The nuclear tests drew international condemnations and sanctions from world powers, including the United States and Japan. The sanctions did not deter Pakistan from retaliating in equal measure. Fifteen days after India's tests, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif authorized six underground nuclear tests at Chagai and Kharan facilities on May 28 and May 30. The game of one-upmanship started anew.

Pakistan stepped up infiltration in the Valley once again. The new area for terror mayhem was the district of Doda, located inside the Chenab Valley on the Kashmir Valley border. Doda got its name from the opium plant called Doddi in local parlance. It then comprised Ramban, Kishtwar, Bhaderwah and Thathri tehsils with a 53:45 Hindu-Muslim population ratio.

Terrorists used Doda as a hideout during their initial years of operations because of its isolation from both Jammu and Srinagar. During the mid-1990s, however, they began to terrorize local Hindu population. In 1997, the government authorized arming of the Hindus and setting up of Village Defence Committees. Clashes between the VDCs and terrorists soon erupted. Muslims alleged the VDCs were oppressing them.

In June, 1998, 25 Hindus were brutally massacred by terrorists in Chapnari village. The killings raised a public outcry and Atal Behari Vajpayee's government came under pressure to declare Doda as a 'disturbed area' so that central security forces could be deployed to counter terrorism. The BJP's manifestos of 1996 Assembly and 1998 Lok Sabha elections had promised to issue a notification that authorized security forces to effect arrests, search and seizures.

Farooq Abdullah rejected the demand outright. He conveyed to the Centre that the move would be counter-productive. It would turn out to be another 'white elephant' for both the State and the Central government.

Farooq was joined by Syed Ali Shah Geelani, Chairman of the All-Party Hurriyat Conference in opposing the proposal. He warned that it would 'further aggravate the situation' and it would become 'dangerous' and lead to 'fear, harassment and excesses by security forces'. He said that VDCs inducted only Hindus, and Muslims of the district were harassed by them. He also alleged the operations by security forces had led to an 'increase in excesses on the people in rural areas'.*

Geelani's Islamist rhetoric notwithstanding, Advani and Farooq visited the affected areas. Farooq was heckled by angry Chapnari residents. They accused him of thwarting effective operations by security forces. Advani was taken aback by the peoples' reaction, more so because the massacre had taken place in Lok Sabha constituencies represented by the BJP. Embarrassed by the heckling, he declared, "I have no business to rule if I can't protect you." The Doda killings, he added, were an attempt at 'religious cleansing'.

In Parliament too, while answering Opposition's charges on the situation, Advani reiterated, "I will abide by what I said in Doda if the Government fails to control the situation."

Even as pious vows were made, and Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan arrived in Colombo for the SAARC summit end of July 1998, Pakistan unleashed its big guns on the Kashmir LoC (Line of Control). The shelling started before Sharif enplaned for Colombo and continued while he talked of restarting the Indo-Pak dialogue with Vajpayee. Two days later, Sharif emerged from the discussions to tell a Sri Lankan newspaper that talks with India were a 'waste of time'. It signalled the opening up of an unprecedented barrage of heavy fire all along the LoC—from Siachen to Kanzalwan, Machhal and Keran sectors along the Kishanganga river, and also in Tangdhar, Naugam and Rampur sectors.

The Pakistan Army fired more than a thousand rounds each of artillery and mortar bombs along with rocket, grenade and air-defence gun bursts at all locations along the LoC. The heaviest barrage was directed at Uri. More than 2,500 shells and mortar bombs were unleashed at it. In some instances, the targeted areas were as much as 20 kilometres inside Indian territory.

Defence Minister George Fernandes rushed to the border to take stock of the situation on August 4.

That night, the Indian Army unleashed more than 5,000 rounds of artillery, mortar and rocket fire on Pakistan positions in Chakothi and Chinari area of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. Fernandes told Parliament that Pakistan had launched the offensive to 'obstruct and stall' bilateral dialogue and to push terrorists into the Valley.

The violence along the LoC and in Kashmir were of political concern, but Farooq was also staring at an empty treasury in the State. The J&K government did nothing since Farooq came to power in 1996 to shore up its revenue sources or even ensure its efficient collection. Salaries to government employees and MLAs had not been paid for months. "How would we survive if the Centre does not support us? I need funds. Where are the funds? The Centre needs to give them to us . . . Yes, I promised jobs, but we need jobs in lakhs which the Centre has to provide. What can Farooq Abdullah do single-handedly?" he said. The Centre provided Rs 250 crores to tide over Farooq's financial crisis after a meeting with him in New Delhi.

The next day he was scheduled to leave for Srinagar. J&K Resident Commissioner, along with the entire entourage, arrived at the airport to see off the Chief Minister, but he was nowhere to be found. Frantic officials rushed to airport authorities for help. They checked the passenger manifest of all flights leaving around the time. "Farooq sahib took off an hour ago," the airport official informed the Commissioner with a mischievous smile. "He was on his way to Mumbai while you are waiting for him to show up for the Srinagar flight."

*Kak, M.L. "Farooq against BJP move in Doda." The Tribune, 1998
Available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/1998/98jul23/j&k.htm#1>

Chapter

24

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee visited Jammu & Kashmir for two days in the first week of December, 1998. The first leg covered Ladakh, where he addressed public meetings at Leh and Kargil. It was the first visit by a PM to the region in over a decade. Farooq Abdullah and his ministerial colleagues accompanied the Prime Minister.

Vajpayee's arrival in Srinagar was greeted by a powerful bomb blast at a public place despite stringent security measures. Though no one was killed in the explosion, it sent ominous shock waves across the Valley. The public reception and the news conference of the Prime Minister, however, proceeded without interruption.

Farooq was full of concern about the ingress of jihadi elements from Pakistan. He wished for a quick solution to end the years of strife and raised the issue on a public platform—why not, he suggested, convert the Line of Control into a permanent international border with Pakistan? Vajpayee rejected it firmly; he said that it can't be done. The issue wasn't as simple as Farooq thought it was. And, it wasn't for the State government to come up with impromptu advice on international matters.

Vajpayee, with Farooq at his side, stressed that while Pakistan had been creating tension and provocation along the border, in an attempt to bring in a third party to intervene between the two countries, the Kashmir issue could be resolved only within the framework of the Simla Agreement. "Kashmir is one of the best symbols of India's ancient civilizations and modern nationhood; it is the strongest refutation of the communal basis for

the two-nation theory.” He spelt out India’s position with regards to Indo-Pak relationship. “Let other issues be discussed and this one be frozen . . . The Parliament has passed a resolution that the entire State of Jammu and Kashmir, including POK, is an integral part of India,” he said.

He also set at rest speculation in Kashmir that the BJP government would tinker with the special status of the State. “There is no proposal to change that status. We believe in further devolution of powers (to states),” he concluded.*

The public snub embarrassed the Chief Minister. He immediately clarified that it was his personal opinion and not the government’s view. Apart from this glitch, Vajpayee’s visit proceeded with great bonhomie; Farooq played the perfect host to the hilt.

Events went into a roller coaster after Vajpayee’s Kashmir visit. There was a sudden thaw in Indo-Pak relationships. Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif invited his Indian counterpart to Lahore for the inauguration of the New Delhi-Lahore bus service. The initiative was a part of Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) between the two countries.

Vajpayee crossed the border on February 19, 1999, and was accorded a historic reception. On the sidelines, while warm pleasantries were exchanged between the two leaders and the Lahore Declaration was signed, Pakistan Army Chief Gen. Pervez Musharraf quietly boarded a helicopter and flew to forward positions in POK. He put into operation a military plan to occupy commanding heights in Kargil on the Indian side of the border.

It took India nearly two months to realize the grave intrusions that had taken place in its sensitive territory. Kargil town lies mid-point between Srinagar and Leh, and the surrounding mountain tops command an uninterrupted view of the only highway that connects Ladakh to Kashmir, and beyond. The capture of heights gave Pakistan strategic depth into Indian territory. It could now cut off Leh from Srinagar and gravely jeopardize national security.

The Kargil intrusion popped the Lahore bonhomie balloon in a moment—India and Pakistan were at war again. It lasted two months, 3 weeks and 2

days, from May 3 to July 26, 1999. The Indian Army suffered 527 casualties, another 1363 were wounded.

Before Vajpayee's peace diplomacy with Pakistan backfired, his coalition politics had received a severe drubbing at the hands of one of his allies, the AIADMK. Its supremo Jayalalitha was unhappy with Vajpayee because he was unwilling to withdraw corruption cases against her and meet her demand to dismiss rival K. Karunanidhi's government in Tamil Nadu over alleged inept handling of the law and order situation in the State.

Parliament was in session and the Budget for the financial year was to be passed. Jayalalitha met the President, K.R. Narayan, on April 14 and handed him a letter withdrawing support to government. Narayan asked Vajpayee to seek a vote of confidence in Lok Sabha on April 17, 1999. Vajpayee was assured of support of five MPs of the Bahujan Samaj Party led by Mayawati, but on the day of the vote, she announced that she would vote against the government. The dramatic turnaround threw the BJP into a spin. It was a precarious situation. Vajpayee confidante, Pramod Mahajan, moved heaven and earth to secure either a tie or a win by at least one vote. The government eventually lost the confidence motion by one vote.

One of the missing votes at the critical test of strength on the floor of the House was that of National Conference MP Saifuddin Soz. He voted against the motion even though his party colleague Omar Abdullah voted in favour of it. Soz was miffed because while Farooq Abdullah pushed his son hard, he 'sidelined Soz in an extremely petty manner'.

The senior party functionary was upset with Farooq over a couple of other things too. Soz had suggested the name of a certain person to be included in India's official delegation for Haj, but Farooq Abdullah blocked it. Similarly, when the Prime Minister visited Srinagar on December 6, 1998, he was supposed to meet ministers of the State government. The PM and his team were running behind schedule, and Abdullah dismissed the meeting in an 'extremely cavalier' manner. The events rankled in Soz's mind. Vajpayee paid the price for them.*

Though Soz received a lot of flak for voting against the motion, Vajpayee government fell because of BJP's failure to manage regional small parties

which had converted themselves into ‘family-held private companies’. Mayawati’s switchover at the very last minute through a ‘midnight deal’ with Jayalalitha was the case in point.

The other missing vote was of Giridhar Gamang. He was a member of Lok Sabha, but he was elected as Congress Chief Minister of Orissa on February 17, 1999. Mahajan took it for granted that he had resigned after his election. Gamang turned up on April 17, much to Mahajan’s surprise, and voted against Vajpayee government to ensure its defeat by just one vote.

The Lok Sabha was dissolved after the government was ousted and Vajpayee was asked to lead the caretaker government till elections were held between September 5 and October 3, 1999. The Kargil war took place while Vajpayee was the caretaker Prime Minister.

BJP bagged a slightly improved tally of 180 seats while the Congress fell to 114. National Conference, because of the internal weaknesses of its rivals—the Congress and BJP—won in four out of the six constituencies in the State. Omar Abdullah was re-elected as an MP. He was appointed in the Union government as State Minister for Commerce and Industry on October 13, 1999. The scion of the Abdullah family had jumped the deputy minister slot and straightaway landed just shy of the rank of a Cabinet Minister. Farooq’s position in BJP-led coalition was strengthened by the appointment of his son.

A huge crisis hit the Vajpayee government within weeks of its third tryst with governance. Indian Airlines flight 814 from Kathmandu to New Delhi was hijacked by five terrorists on December 24, 1999. The hijackers ordered the captain to land in Lahore. Pakistan denied permission for the landing, and with fuel running low, it landed in Amritsar. The government conceded the demand for refuelling in Amritsar, but the hijackers panicked at the possibility of a commando raid. They took off for Lahore, refuelled and set off to UAE. They were denied landing permission. It then rerouted to Kandahar in Afghanistan with two passenger casualties on board.

The hijackers initially demanded the release of 36 terrorists detained in Indian jails. After five days of negotiations, the list was cropped down to

just three—Maulana Mehmood Azar, Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh and Mushtaq Ahmad Zargar.

Farooq went into a ‘towering rage’ when he was told that two of the three terrorists were to be released from jails in his State. He shouted and yelled at A.S. Dulat, Intelligence Bureau chief in Srinagar, for over three hours.

“He (Farooq) experienced waves of anger. He would calm down and then would start all over again. Calm down and start again . . . how weak Delhi was, how big mistake this is, what a bunch of bloody idiots, buffoon. It just went on and on and on . . . He then called up Jaswant Singh and gave him an earful: ‘Aap jo bhi kar rahe hai, galat kar rahe hai (You are doing a wrong thing).’ He called up others in Delhi. He kept banging the phone down. I will not let this Kashmiri fellow (Zargar) go, he’s a killer. He will not be released,” he told Dulat angrily.

Farooq rushed to the Governor at 10 p.m. and announced he would rather resign than release the two terrorists in State jail. “I have told the R&AW chief I won’t be party to it. These bloody fellows don’t know what they are doing.” Gary Saxena, doing another term as Governor, sat down Farooq and poured him two stiff drinks from a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label whisky. Farooq thereafter agreed to release Masood Azar and Zargar. The hijacking ended on December 31.*

It was the second time Farooq had vociferously opposed the release of jailed terrorist. The first time it was in exchange for the Mufti’s daughter Rubaiya in 1989.

Farooq was in full control in Srinagar, and he was in an ambitious mood. He was sure that he could extract more from the Vajpayee-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government that was heavily dependent on the support of 23 other political parties for its survival at the Centre. The concession was once again autonomy for J&K.

In June 2000, both the Houses of J&K legislature passed what is popularly referred to as the Autonomy Resolution. It, inter alia, restored the pre-1953 status by which, except for defence, communication and foreign affairs, all other powers were vested with the State government. Farooq had proposed

a similar arrangement to former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao while he was leading a minority government that was heavily dependent on its partners. Rao had conceded to a large extent but had suddenly withdrawn at the last moment. He was possibly looking at JKLF leader Shabir Shah to pick up the cue and replace Farooq at the negotiating table. Shabir Shah did not quite understand the signal from the Burkina Faso broadcast and lost a critical opportunity forever.

Farooq made the abrupt move to bring the Autonomy Resolution in order to set the bottom line on Kashmir in a formal manner. It was also aimed at forcing the Centre's hand on the issue to the greatest extent possible. The Resolution was described as an expression of the will of the people of J&K through their elected representatives.

The manoeuvre did not go well with Vajpayee. He put his foot down. Farooq hadn't expected such a strong response. He hastened to ensure it was not summarily dismissed. He persuaded senior minister George Fernandes to have the resolution referred to a committee for a thorough examination. Fernandes failed in his attempt and the Union Cabinet rejected it summarily in under a month.

"The Cabinet finds the resolution passed by the State Assembly of Jammu and Kashmir endorsing the report of the State Autonomy Committee unacceptable. The Cabinet feels that the acceptance of this resolution would set the clock back and reverse the natural process of harmonizing the aspirations of the people of J&K with the integrity of the nation. Most of the recommendations contained in the report of the State Autonomy Committee," it said, "seek to reverse the application of constitutional provisions to the State of J&K which may not only adversely affect the interest of the people of the State but would also tantamount to removal of some of the essential safeguards enshrined in our Constitution.

"Besides, the issue of restoring the constitutional situation in J&K to its pre-1953 position had been discussed in detail by Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1974-75. It is noteworthy that the agreement was signed after these negotiations had affirmed that 'provisions of the Constitution of India already applied to the State of Jammu and Kashmir without adaptation or modification are unalterable.' The Cabinet,

therefore, decides not to accept the resolution passed by the J&K Assembly on the report of the State Autonomy Committee. The government is of the firm conviction that national integration and devolution of powers to State must go together.”

Farooq Abdullah hadn't anticipated such a quick and firm response. Elections were just two years away; he had bet on the government to keep the issue under deliberation, both with him and with the allies of the government. The response was also a stark reiteration of Government of India's stand during Narasimha Rao's regime. The BJP clearly didn't wish to play along with Farooq's poll strategy.

Vajpayee spoke to Farooq and candidly told him to decide on his continuation in the NDA where his son was a minister. Home Minister L.K. Advani too advised him not to press the issue. Farooq threatened to resign and pull NC out of the fragile coalition. He called a meeting of his MLAs on July 10, 2000 to decide on the issue. The meeting continued through the day as legislators debated the political fall-out in Srinagar and Delhi. They broke in the evening to give it deeper thought and meet the next morning.

Farooq's mother Akbar Jehan died on July 11. Home Minister Advani was to visit the Abdullahs to offer condolences. At the last minute, Prime Minister Vajpayee decided to go, too. Defence Minister George Fernandes also accompanied them.

Farooq was visibly touched by Vajpayee's gesture of personally coming to Srinagar for his mother's funeral. The tensions between the two, that threatened to turn brittle, softened into a pliable understanding. Farooq accepted the fate of Autonomy Resolution and Omar continued his job as Union minister.

Farooq's reconciliatory approach was partly dictated by the re-emergence of his arch rival in the Valley, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, in his new avatar as the head of a regional political party. Mufti had spent his life with national parties, chiefly the Congress and briefly the Jan Morcha, but he had now become weary of the Congress' mechanizations. “The Congress party doesn't listen to us,” he complained when the party high command turned down his suggestion to appoint him as party chief in J&K, and his daughter,

Mehbooba, as the leader of the Congress Legislature Party. “You can only have one post,” the Congress President Sitaram Kesri told him bluntly.

The idea to form a regional party took shape in January, 1998, but Mufti had secretly started laying the ground for it from 1996. Mehbooba visited families of Kashmiris who had been killed in encounters with security forces and offered her condolences to them. On most occasions, she burst into tears and wailed with the family of the killed terrorists. Her outreach to separatists and her outbursts earned her the nick name of rudaali—professional mourner. It was clear Mufti and Mehbooba were keen to cultivate a constituency, which was attached to jihadi and pro-Pak groups. Their approach was in sharp contrast to other mainstream parties who maintained a distance from terrorists and their families during Kashmir’s turbulent phase.

One of the most talked about visits of Mehbooba was to the funeral of the son of Amir Khan, the second-in-command after Syed Salahuddin in the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen hierarchy. It won her sympathy with the Hizb Chief Salahuddin. His close relative, Ghulam M. Ganai, later joined Mufti’s newly launched Peoples Democratic Party and was the link between the PDP and Hizb-ul-Mujahideen.

Mufti Mohammad Sayeed formally launched the Peoples’ Democratic Party, ironically, two days after the end of the Kargil war in July 1999. Its purpose was to ‘persuade the Government of India to initiate an unconditional dialogue with Kashmiris for resolution of the Kashmir problem’. The National Conference government, Mufti said at the inaugural, had ‘failed to provide a healing touch to the Kashmiris who suffered immensely’.

Journalist Praveen Donthi, writing in The Caravan magazine’s January 2016 issue, reported on the view that ‘the PDP was a creation of the National Democratic Alliance government, launched to fill the need of a pro-India party.’ One theory about ‘the genesis of the PDP’, he wrote, was that ‘the BJP government funded and supported the PDP to prop up opposition to the National Conference.’ The purported reason for this move was that the NC leader, ‘Farooq Abdullah, was becoming an inconvenience to the Centre.’ He quoted a former commander of Ikhwan, a counter insurgency group

propped up the Indian Army, Liaquat Ali Khan, as saying that all Indian agencies were directed to support the PDP.

Mufti and Mehbooba chose a telling symbol—pen in an inkpot—for their new party. It was the election symbol of Muslim United Front (MUF) whose leaders led the first wave of terrorist activity after the infamous 1987 rigged election. Syed Salahuddin was one of these leaders. Donthi quoted an official on what Mehbooba said at public meetings several times, “This symbol was given to me by my brother Salahuddin. He gave me the mantle to fight in mainstream politics.”*

The Abdullahs were alert about the goings-on. Omar Abdullah, while campaigning during the 1999 elections, complained about the Muftis at public rallies, “They have been making heroes of militants, visiting their residences, distributing money among their families, and finally, pleading for unconditional talks with them.” Omar also alleged that Mufti had cultivated links with the separatist groups, Hurriyat and Jamaat, and he had won the Lok Sabha elections from Anantnag with their support.

Apart from the mechanization at the state level, the Vajpayee government was keen to pursue a broad framework for peace in Kashmir by seeking to normalize Indo-Pak relationship. Despite the setbacks at Lahore and Kargil, it sought out Pakistan President Gen. Pervez Musharraf for talks. Musharraf arrived for the two-day Agra summit on July 14, 2001. The summit evoked unprecedented expectations among political and civil circles as it appeared that the two sides had reached a definitive plan, not only on bilateral ties, but also on the Kashmir issue.

Vajpayee and Musharraf engaged in three rounds of one-on-one meetings and also had an hour-long telephone call prior to Musharaff’s departure to Islamabad. The last-minute parleys too failed to break the deadlock between the two sides. Indian and Pakistan media claimed that the signing of an accord was nixed at the last moment by the ‘hawkish attitude’ of L.K. Advani.

A written statement released by the Ministry of External Affairs at the end of summit, and read out by Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, noted, “Our negotiations for an agreed text of a document was seriously pursued. There

were long hours of discussion at official and political level . . . We are, of course, disappointed that the two sides could not arrive at an agreed text.”

It said that the talks failed because of three reasons. The first, Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said, was due to ‘an unifocal approach by Pakistan, which conflicted with the concept that they abided by, that the relationship had to be broad-based or spaced by an approach, which was dictated by the impulse that unless the issue of Jammu and Kashmir was made central, there would be no progress on any other aspect. They did not believe that the bilateral relations between India and Pakistan ought to, or could be held hostage by a single issue . . . ’

He said that the ‘second aspect was related to crossing border terrorism and violence, which was unacceptable to India’.

He continued that ‘the third reason was that they continue to believe that every compact, or agreement, or effort that had preceded the present effort could not be negated, rescinded, or wished away. That is why they made it clear and there was a reference there that the effort at Agra was a continuation not simply of the Lahore process, but also as a building upon the foundations that were laid by Shimla. It was that central objective which again had some difficulty in being accepted by their distinguished visitors.’

Strangely, for 90 days preceding the Agra summit, Farooq Abdullah was out of the country. He was visiting his family in the UK when the groundwork was laid. Kashmir was at the heart of the negotiations, but Farooq chose to be away. He arrived at New Delhi a day before the summit was to begin to discuss the additional budgetary supplement for J&K with deputy chairman of the Planning Commission K.C. Pant. The meeting yielded an allocation of Rs 2,050 crores to the State.

“I did not expect too much from the very beginning,” Farooq commented soon after Musharraf’s departure, “Kashmir is a 54-year-old problem and cannot be solved in a single meeting . . . The media hyped it so much that Pakistan started thinking that once the two leaders met there would be a toofan (storm) and India will sign on the dotted line . . . I had said there is no need to be very happy about the summit. The higher the expectations the more the chances of you falling flat on your face and hurting yourself . . . I

have never said anything (about the summit). Even now I am not saying anything. If my silence can help, then let it be so.”*

Barely a couple of months past the summit, Jaish-e-Mohammad, a Pakistan-backed terrorist group, struck at the very heart of J&K administration. Three suicide bombers rammed a Tata Sumo vehicle stuffed with explosives into the main gate of the state secretariat on October 1, 2001. Thirty-eight persons were killed and another 60 were injured. None of the legislators were caught in the attack. They were in a meeting at a different location. “India cannot accept such manifestations of hate and terror from across its borders,” an External Affairs Ministry statement said and warned. “There is a limit to India’s patience.”

Farooq Abdullah was livid. Tears rolled down his cheeks when he paid his respects to the innocent people killed in the attack. “The time has come to wage war against Pakistan and to bomb the militant training camps there. We are running out of patience.”†

The blast in Srinagar was followed by Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba attack on Parliament House in New Delhi on December 13, 2001. Home Minister L.K. Advani called it ‘the most audacious and also the most alarming acts of terrorism’. Though Parliament’s session had been adjourned for 40 minutes, members, including the Home Minister, were in the building when the five terrorists drove into the compound in a car with a fake official sticker. They first hit the parked car of Vice President Krishna Kant and then opened fire with AK-47 assault rifles.

Nine security personnel were killed in the gun fight that lasted about 30 minutes. All the five terrorists were neutralized. Four persons were subsequently arrested for hatching the conspiracy for the attack. They included Afzal Guru, his cousin Shaukat Hussain Guru, Shaukat’s wife Afsan Guru, and S.A.R Geelani. Afzal Guru was sentenced to death. He was hanged on February 9, 2013.

The attack sharpened Vajpayee government’s attempts to arrive at a negotiated settlement with moderate elements among the militants. They brought Ram Jethmalani, a distinguished lawyer and former minister, into the mix in a private capacity. He reached out to Kashmiri separatists and

met them for a free discussion in Srinagar in June 2002. By August, he roped in Vinod Grover, a retired Indian Foreign Service officer; eminent lawyers such as Ashok Bhan, Fali Nariman and Shanti Bhushan; newspaper editors like Dilip Padgaonkar and M.J. Akbar; and Amnesty International's Jawaid Laiq; into what came to be known as Ram Jethmalani Kashmir Committee. It visited Srinagar for three days and held talks with the Hurriyat Conference, J&K Democratic Freedom Party Chief Shabir Shah, besides several sections of the civil society.

Farooq Abdullah opposed the dialogue initiated by Jethmalani. State Assembly elections were due in the next couple of months and Farooq did not want any new players in the field. The Kashmir Committee had managed to get the Hurriyat to tone down its opposition to holding elections, while Shabir Shah made it known that he was not averse to his party's participation in them. Advani called Farooq to mute his opposition to the Committee. Farooq agreed. He went a step further with a dare—he said he would step down as CM if the Hurriyat agreed to participate in the polls.

The Committee held three rounds of talks with the separatists and they were headed in the right direction. But on the day the Hurriyat leaders were persuaded to come to Delhi, Advani told Shanti Bhushan that he would not talk to them as they were in touch with Pakistan. He referred to Gen. Musharraf's August 14, Pakistan Independence Day, speech in which he dubbed the forthcoming State polls farcical. Advani said that the speech was a message to the separatists from Pakistan that they should not cooperate with Government of India in its attempt to bring about a negotiated settlement to the Kashmir dispute.

Advani firmly ruled out any talks with the Hurriyat, or the imposition of Governor's rule or postponement of the elections. The Centre will now talk to the elected representatives from the State, he asserted.

Lashkar terrorists struck with a vengeance again on May 21, 2002. They shot dead the respected Hurriyat leader Abdul Ghani Lone. He started his political careers as a Congress MLA in 1967 and later formed the people's Conference 'dedicated to the restoration of internal autonomy in J&K'. The Conference then joined the Hurriyat, an umbrella organization of Kashmiri

separatists. Lone, however, had begun to chart his own course and was recognized as a moderate who was for a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir dispute.

Ram Jethmalani visited the family to offer his condolences. Omar Abdullah reacted swiftly to it. The National Conference decided to have no further contact or association with Ram Jethmalani's Kashmir Committee because it was a 'Congress political committee'. He said that the 'secret meeting' of Sajjad Lone of the Peoples' Conference (son of the slain leader) and Saifuddin Soz (who had quit NC and joined the Congress) at the residence of Ram Jethmalani in the presence of other committee members proved the misgivings of Dr Farooq Abdullah about the objective of the committee.

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Chapter

25

Omar Abdullah's way of looking at politics and his stint as a Union minister attracted Atal Behari Vajpayee's attention. He could see the promise in the young man and toyed with the idea of putting the son ahead of his father in Kashmir politics. He, therefore, took his Union Minister of State Minister for Commerce on a few foreign tours, including his state visit to Japan, in order to test his merit. He liked how Omar made the most of the opportunity. In July 2001, he shifted Omar to high-profile Ministry of External Affairs.

Omar responded to the overtures, eager as he was to strengthen his personal relationship with the Prime Minister, and invited him for dinner at his New Delhi home. Vajpayee came with his foster daughter, son-in-law Ranjan Bhattacharya, and advisor Brijesh Mishra. Omar's father and in-laws were the only other people at the get-together. Payal, Omar's wife, played the perfect hostess as the choicest of non-vegetarian Kashmiri delicacies and expensive alcohol were served to the guests. It was a pleasant evening that concluded with the idea of moving Farooq to Delhi in a suitable position, and installing Omar as CM in J&K.

The position of Vice President of India was to fall vacant. A search was on to find the new incumbent. Vajpayee mentioned it to Farooq, Brijesh Mishra followed it up, and a little later, Advani made a direct offer to him. Farooq was delighted. It was a prestigious position, a small step away from holding the highest office in the land—the President of India. It appeared to Farooq as if his dream job was within his grasp.

Murmurs of opposition to the proposed elevation soon started. The RSS, BJP's parent organization, was the first to protest. Farooq cannot be trusted with such a high office, it said; he's too temperamental and unreliable. It was also pointed out that the Vice President was Chairman of the Rajya Sabha who had to apply himself fully during its sessions. Farooq was too outgoing; he would not have the patience to sit through day-long debates during long-drawn sessions. Vajpayee dropped the idea. He also refrained from even making the offer of ministership at the Centre in lieu of the failed promise. Farooq was infuriated over the 'betrayal'.

Vajpayee had earlier leveraged the offer of vice-presidency with Farooq to suggest Governor's rule for a few months before 2002 election in J&K. "There are allegations that polls haven't been free and fair in the State because of NC's influence. The moderates among the militants want that elections this time should be carried out under a neutral Governor. If we do so, it will encourage wider participation and give credibility to the exercise," he explained to him. Farooq promptly agreed.

But when the plum position was denied to him, he did a somersault. "What Governor rule? Why do we need Governor's rule?" he asked in an incredulous tone. Brijesh Mishra was enraged at the reply. He sent for Omar Abdullah.

"Why is your father resisting Governor's rule?" he asked him curtly.

"I think you should talk to him," Omar replied.

"Please convey to him that if he's unwilling to cooperate then we have our own ways of doing it." Brijesh Mishra snorted at him. Omar was taken aback by the rudeness.*

The Vajpayee government did not impose Governor's rule and 2002 elections were announced.

Farooq handed over charge of National Conference President to Omar Abdullah barely four months before the polls. The full installation of the heir was now complete—Omar was the party head, an elected Member of

Parliament as well as Union Minister barely four years after entering politics.

“I have made my own circumstances, taken my own decisions. The decision to enter politics was my own decision and I have nobody else except myself to blame if things don’t go well. And, so far, touch wood, there hasn’t been a single day when I have got up in the morning and said, ‘I wish I wasn’t in this’.” A satisfied smile played on Omar’s lips.

“The weight of the Sheikh Abdullah legacy is obviously something I am constantly reminded of,” he paused for a second, “It would be difficult not to be reminded of it as my family’s history is intrinsically linked with the history of J&K. But I also understand that I am my own individual. I am not a carbon copy of either Sheikh Abdullah or Farooq Abdullah and, therefore, it is my job to take whatever I have from this legacy, inherit whatever dreams this legacy gives me but also use my own (mind).” Omar smiled.

“To believe that I am only here to fulfil the legacy that has been passed on to me is incorrect. Coming from a new generation as I do, I obviously will have new ideas, my own beliefs, my own way of wanting to do things. and this would gradually become clearer as the days go by,” he said and leaned back on the sofa.

Preparing for the 2002 Assembly elections as party president was a tough call for Omar. He admitted that it was ‘an eye-opener’, because he realized that the actual campaign was not as difficult as the selection of candidates and who to campaign for. “It has been a learning experience . . . a very steep learning curve. I am sure it will be very useful in the days ahead,” he said to the authors with a boyish grin.

Omar was confident that the time was ripe for a new generation of Kashmir politicians to take over the decision-making in the State. “Kashmir is unique as the people across the spectrum today are those who, under Indian circumstances, would be categorized as political children. Take the Kashmir Valley. In the Valley, the Congress has no role to play. The fight is between the NC, PDP and certain sections of the Hurriyat. Now look at the age demography in this. I am 32. Mehbooba Mufti is in her 30s. Mirwaiz Umar Farooq is not even in his 30s yet. Sajjad Lone is perhaps 34 or 35. I think

this sort of a scenario, where this kind of intense election fight at such a young age is going on, is unprecedented. What you are looking at now is, perhaps, the future political make-up of Kashmir over the next two decades.”

The new leadership, both on the secessionist side as well as in the mainstream, was an educated one. It had seen the world outside the State, and perhaps, had a new way of looking at situations. “Yes, a lot of times we will tom-tom the same political messages,” he said, “but the fact is that our experience, our travels, our generational difference will perhaps mean we will look at Kashmir in a different light. And from being able to look at it from a different light, will emerge solutions that otherwise one has not been able to look at.”

Omar was unsure about his own prospects of becoming the Chief Minister if his party won a majority. “It will depend on my father being either being given a good post in Delhi or he decides to retire,” he said with half a smile. “The NC will not be a part of a coalition government. The verdict of the people will be clear. And, God forbid, if NC does not get a majority, it won’t have the right to form the government. You can’t abuse the verdict of the people,” he said with determination.

The results came out on October 10, 2002. “The reasons for the Abdullah debacle will probably inspire Ph. D thesis someday,” India Today commented in its report, “The first, most simplistic factor was good old anti-incumbency. Farooq’s government paid for six wasted years, a period in which it promised much, delivered little and had the Chief Minister dividing time between foreign holidays—he left for South Africa after the third of the election’s four phases—and the golf course, with occasional visits to the State secretariat.”

The report hinted at differences between the father and son duo. “Omar’s distaste for his father’s flamboyant ways—he moved out of the Chief Minister’s residence a few weeks ago—and alienation of the NC’s old guard didn’t help. The new NC chief replaced a third of his party’s sitting MLAs. Yet, of the party’s 30 new faces, as many as 21 lost. What’s more, the displeased veterans only fuelled rebellion and ate into the NC vote in constituency after constituency,” it said.

What shocked political circles in the State was that not only Omar Abdullah lost from Ganderbal, but Farooq's brother, Dr Kamal Mustafa, too, lost from Gulmarg. Both the constituencies were considered pocket boroughs of the Abdullah family. The NC's tally fell dramatically from the 44 seats won in the Valley in 1996 to just 18. It was, therefore, reduced to merely 28 seats, a loss of 29 seats, in an 87-member House. "You cannot expect miracles from me. I had just taken over as president. The Abdullah legacy is no guarantee for success," Omar shot back at a journalist, and then added, "No doubt, the NC's continuation in the NDA after the Autonomy Resolution was rejected has had a bearing on the people's thinking."

The Congress and the PDP were the major gainers. The Congress bagged a total of 20 seats. Five of these seats were from the Valley. The PDP got 16, while the BJP secured just one seat. Bhim Singh's Panthers Party notched up four seats, good enough for it to join the Mufti Mohammad Sayeed-led coalition government as a cabinet minister.

Omar, despite leading the largest party in the Assembly, and true to his word, refused to form the government. The PDP and the Congress came together. They decided to split the six-year term of the Assembly into three years of power each. Mufti took oath for the first three years. Congress' Ghulam Nabi Azad led the government in the last three.

Though the election saw an impressive 43 per cent voter turnout, it also witnessed the highest number of political killings by terrorists. In 45 days of the campaign, 46 political activists, including the Minister of State for Law Mushtaq Ghani Lone, were gunned down. The only consolation for the high price paid for the ballot was that the elections were internationally certified as free and fair for the first time in almost two decades.

Installation of PDP-Congress government in Srinagar, and the drubbing the BJP received at the Assembly elections, did not dampen Prime Minister Atal Behari's Vajpayee's effort to seek out a Kashmir formula for peace. On April 18, 2003, he addressed a public meeting in Srinagar with Mufti Mohammad Sayeed in which he signalled a rapprochement with the Hurriyat once again. "Hurriyat ke saath insaaniyat ke dairay mein baat hogi (Talks with the Hurriyat will be in the ambit of humanity)," he announced with his typical Vajpayee flourish.

In a statement in the Lok Sabha, he said, “I assured the people of Jammu and Kashmir that we wish to resolve all issues, both domestic and external, through talks. I stressed that the gun can solve no problem, brotherhood can do so. Issues can be resolved if we move forward guided by three principles of insaaniyat, jambooriyat and Kashmiriyat (humanism, democracy and Kashmir’s legacy of Hindu-Muslim amity).”*

Later in the year, J&K’s first mobile service was inaugurated by Vajpayee and Mufti. “Der aaye, dursut aaye (Better late than never),” he joked when the Prime Minister answered the call on his mobile device.

Vajpayee’s engagement with the Valley was continuous. Vajpayee made eight visits to Kashmir, Home Minister L.K. Advani landed at Srinagar airport over two dozen times and Congress president and Leader of the Opposition Sonia Gandhi travelled eight times in four years to the State. President of India A.P.J. Abdul Kalam also visited what was once described by US President Bill Clinton as ‘the most dangerous place on earth’.

The sidelining of National Conference irked Farooq and Omar Abdullah. “It is strange that the National Conference’s views were sought on whether Indian troops should be sent to Iraq, but our view of Kashmir were never sought. Is my view on Kashmir not relevant?” Farooq complained. “We are allies of the government in the NDA, but the Prime Minister shares a platform with Mufti Mohammad Sayeed and not with Farooq or Omar Abdullah. Can he ignore Om Prakash Chautala and share platform with Bansi Lal in Haryana or with Amarinder Singh in Punjab and ignore NDA partner Parkash Singh Badal? So why is it that he comes to J&K and addresses a rally with Mufti and neglects NC completely? No mention of the contribution of six years of NC rule. They behave as if we did not exist.”

Omar resigned from the Union Cabinet on December 13, 2002, and NC pulled out of the NDA on July 22, 2003. Gujarat riots of 2002 were cited as the reason for the breakup. Omar said he was deeply affected by the anti-Muslim rioting in Gujarat and the State government’s collusion with the rioters. “There was no doubt that as an individual I was feeling uncomfortable about it. That’s why I had persisted with the idea of my resignation,” he confessed.

Omar had initially approached the party leadership for permission to quit the Union Cabinet. Farooq Abdullah persuaded him to stay put and register the party's protest to the Union government. "It was a mistake to continue in the government after the Gujarat riots and this mistake became apparent through the passage of time. What we had done was not enough. We were assured action against the guilty and we believed them," Omar admitted with a touch of melancholy. "I should have persisted with my resignation . . . I did not. Now it is something I have to live with . . . there's nothing I can do about it now," he concluded.

The breaking of the alliance was also purportedly a part of the angst, though political circles were convinced that Farooq pulled out after his request for induction in the Union government was politely declined by the government. The NC, incidentally, had specifically given him the Rajya Sabha ticket to facilitate his entry in the Union government.

Omar, however, said that the snapping of ties became necessary because of the defeat in Assembly elections. The rejection of the Autonomy Resolution by the NDA-led Central government had cost NC dearly. It hurt its public image. Omar believed that by pulling out of the government, NC restored its credibility with the people. The party could now speak plainly about government policies which were not in larger public interest.

The issues with NDA came to an abrupt close when the latter lost power in the 2004 parliamentary polls. Congress-led United Progressive Alliance with Dr Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister came to power. In the State too, the government transitioned from Mufti Mohammad Sayeed to Congress Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad. In several ways, therefore, Farooq and Omar Abdullah were back in the reckoning.

Manmohan Singh took forward Vajpayee's work on Kashmir. He initiated round tables with all shades of opinion in the Valley, especially separatist elements like the Hurriyat. The leaders were also allowed to travel more freely. Back-channel diplomacy was activated with Pakistan.

Pugwash, a European think-tank on South Asia issues, organized an international conference on Kashmir mid-March 2006. The conference proposed to discuss recent proposals on self-rule, better communication

between the two Kashmirs and options for sustainable peace along the Indo-Pak border.

Omar Abdullah, Hurriyat Conference chairman Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, Adbul Ghani Bhat, PDP's Moulvi Iftikhar Hussain Ansari, former Foreign Secretary S.K. Lamba (who was involved in back-channel diplomacy), besides others were invited to the conference. Prominent leaders from Pakistan Occupied Kashmir were also scheduled to attend the three-day meet.

It was the first-ever visit to Pakistan in 30 years by J&K's mainstream political leaders. Sheikh Abdullah had visited the country in 1964 to meet the then President Ayub Khan, while Farooq Abdullah crossed the border in 1974 at the invitation of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front. Omar Abdullah was now invited with the promise of a one-on-one meeting with Pakistan President Gen. Pervez Musharraf.

The trip to Islamabad was important for him. The Union government was not keen on his attendance, but it ultimately came around to his view that the conference needed his voice. He was right. India needed to be defended strongly on the home turf of jihadi elements.

Soon after his arrival in Islamabad, a hostile Pakistan Press confronted him with provocative questions. Omar was polite, but pointed, with them. "There were people (in Pakistan) who were upset because I used fairly harsh words for the so-called jihadi elements operating in Jammu and Kashmir. But I told the gathering that what was happening in J&K could not be called jihad by any stretch of imagination," he said to the media on his return to India.

"Jihad is fought when Islam is in danger and at no point it looked that Islam was in danger in the State. Jihad is a religious battle and not a political battle. What is happening in Kashmir is that some elements feel they need independence. Jihad does not mean killing innocent people. Most of the victims are Muslims. They got angry when I asked them how they could justify this kind of jihad."*

The big highlight of his visit was the meeting with President Musharraf. The second highlight was the reception hosted by the government of the other side of Kashmir where POK Prime Minister Sardar Sikandar Hayat Khan, and leaders like Sardar Qayyum Khan and Sardar Atiq Khan, were present.

Gen. Musharraf engaged Omar on the subject of self-rule. He explained to Omar in some detail why he was advocating self-rule. Omar presented him with a copy of the Autonomy Resolution passed by the J&K Assembly. “He was very honest and clear when he said his conception of governance was still an evolving concept. It is not something on which a document has been prepared . . . I got the feeling he was still working on it. Perhaps, it was the reason he was interested in hearing from me what autonomy was all about.”

The interaction convinced Omar that Gen. Musharraf had stepped back from the traditional line of implementing the UN Security Council resolution of 1947 with regard to Kashmir. He thought it was ‘a very significant development’.

Omar returned from the conference ‘personally and professionally’ happy. “I had gone there with mixed feelings about what to expect, and returned very satisfied,” he told journalists.

Interestingly, the self-governance idea had come to limelight during the visit of a delegation of American Congressmen led by Dan Burton to Delhi in November 2005. The delegation met leaders from J&K to discuss solutions to the Kashmir issue. Earlier, Farooq and Omar had met Home Minister Shivraj Patil, who agreed to examine the Autonomy Resolution as a possible solution to the problem. The resolution is the only legal paper that has the endorsement of the people of J&K through their elected representatives, they told Patil.

An opportunity to present himself as a frontline ‘national’ leader arose before Omar when the Indo-US nuclear deal came up before Parliament in 2006. It was a tricky political issue. The Left parties, who were the largest single bloc supporting the UPA in Lok Sabha, had threatened to pull out of the alliance and bring down the government. NC’s arch rival, the PDP, was

a UPA ally. The NC was in no way obliged to vote in favour of Prime Minister Manmohan's historical initiative.

Omar Abdullah brushed aside the differences and met Minister for External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee. It was his own decision. He spoke to the senior Congress politician for over 90 minutes, and closely questioned him about the technical, legal and diplomatic aspects of the nuclear deal. "My only requirement was," he told Pranab Mukherjee at the end of the dialogue, "that I should be satisfied about various questions (about the deal). I am satisfied with your explanations. I have to now talk to my father and convince him," he said.

Pranab Mukherjee remarked about the meeting, "I can see traits of Sheikh Abdullah in Omar Abdullah."

July 22, 2008 was a day of much mud-slinging, shouting and bedlam in the Lok Sabha as the Opposition alleged the Congress had paid bribes to some Members of Parliament to vote in favour of the confidence motion. BJP MPs threw wads of currency notes in the air which, they claimed, were given to them by UPA ally's MP Amar Singh to swing their vote. The noisy scenes made Omar apprehensive whether he would get a chance to speak on the issue.

The Congress ensured he did. The young MP rose to speak early evening, just ahead of Prime Minister's reply in the House. The Press galleries were full. Omar was angry about how the proceedings had played out during the day. He let the anger flow. His eyes shone with the suppressed passion. "It lasted barely minutes," Indian Express reported, "But coming as it did at the end of a day which saw rupee notes being fished out of a bag in the Well of the House, it stood for its eloquence—and dignity."*

"Sir," Omar began, "I am a Muslim and I am an Indian, and I don't see any distinction between the two. I see no reason why I as a Muslim have to fear a deal between India and the United States of America. This deal is between two countries—it is a deal between two countries that in the future will be two equals."

Omar's opening remarks stunned the Lok Sabha into silence. "Sir," he addressed the Chair, "the enemies of Indian Muslims are not the Americans. The enemies of Indian Muslims are the same enemies that all the poor people of India face—poverty, hunger, unemployment, lack of development," he paused, "and the absence of our voice. We are against the effort that is made to crush our voice."

Omar hit out at the Left for acting like a judge on the secular credentials of political parties. "Today, the Left is telling me that all secular parties should stand with the BJP to bring down this government. The same Left treated me like a political untouchable when I was with the NDA," he said with a hint of sarcasm. "I am not a member of the UPA and don't aspire to be one. I made a mistake to be with the NDA, especially after Gujarat riots happened. My conscience had asked me to quit NDA but I didn't. My conscience has still not forgiven me," he lamented.

Referring to the Amarnath Yatra, which L.K Advani had brought up in his speech a day before, Abdullah said that he had fought for the cause since it involved the land of his people. He dared the BJP to name a single leader from Jammu and Kashmir who had opposed the Amarnath Yatra. Omar said emphatically, "As long as there is even one Muslim in Kashmir, the Amarnath Yatra will continue. One thing I wish to say with certainty that my politics doesn't change like that of these people . . . here today, there tomorrow . . . we had shaken hands with secularism and we will continue to do so."

Though the speech was short, it generated a big hype over social media as well as the mainline media. "I had absolutely no idea at the time that I would say something in that fashion, or that it would turn out to be something people will remember so much. Of course, it was an important debate and I was quite keen to put across my party's point of view forward. But the way the day developed, one started to get the impression that I wouldn't get a chance to speak.*

"It was what I felt. I spoke straight from the heart . . . There has been a concerted effort to create this perception that first the Muslims are against the nuclear deal with America and also that the nuclear deal with America is anti-Muslim. This is all rubbish and this perception is being created by

those political parties who always want to brand Muslims to be against the interests of the country. That's why I did emphasize that I am a Muslim and I am an Indian and that the two are not mutually exclusive".

Abdullah's speech was one of the three speeches that the UPA had scheduled to wrap up the debate in response to the 'canard' that Muslims did not favour the deal. The speech won Omar many admirers in political and social circles. It also paved the way for re-igniting Congress-NC relationship. Congress experiments with PDP as a partner in power wasn't going too well. Omar's move opened up a possibility in 2008 Assembly elections.

*Dulat, A.S., and Sinha Aditya Dulat. Kashmir: The Vajpayee Years (India: Harper Collins, 2015)

*"Statement by Prime Minister Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee in Lok Sabha on his two day visit to Jammu & Kashmir." Media Center, Ministry of External Affairs. April 22, 2003. Available at: <https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/4351/Statement+by+Prime+Minister+Shri+Atal+Bihari+Vajpayee+in+Lok+Sabha+on+his+two+day+visit+to+Jammu+amp+Kashmir>

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Chapter

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Farooq Abdullah stepped out of the General Zorawar Singh stadium in Jammu and sang ‘Papa kehte the bada naam karega, beta hamara bada kaam karega’ to journalists at the swearing in ceremony of Omar Abdullah as the eleventh Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir on January 5, 2009.

Farooq danced his danced in the air, did a little shuffle, peered into the eyes of a reporter and continued in a meaningful tone ‘Kaam hai mushkil par beta naam karega . . . ’ (Papa said his son will accomplish a big deed and bring fame to the family . . . the task is difficult but nevertheless he will earn a name for himself).

The popular song from a Hindi film seemed a bit loud for the solemn ceremony wrapped in winter freeze, but Farooq Abdullah was in his elements. His son, barely 38, was now the youngest Chief Minister ever in J&K. The mirth was, perhaps, also his way of saying all was well in the Abdullah household.

In the days leading up to the formation of a NC-Congress government, political circles were rife with talk that Farooq was keen to be the Chief Minister yet again. Farooq had interrupted a TV channel reporter to remind him that he was speaking to ‘the future Chief Minister of the State’. Initial parleys with the Congress too referred to a ‘new government headed by Farooq Abdullah’. It was said that Omar, who led the party to victory after a disastrous showing in 2002 elections, was miffed with his father’s effort to pole vault over the son’s turn to be in power.

The scenario changed dramatically after a family dinner on the night of December 28, 2008, after Mollie's arrival from London. She had kept herself away from political issues throughout her long marriage with maverick Farooq, but when she heard of her husband's ambitions, she decided to intervene on behalf of Omar. In a quiet, firm tone she told her Farooq to let the son have his chance as the third chief minister from the house of the Abdullahs.

It was also said that the Congress emphatically rejected Farooq's bid for power. Rahul Gandhi insisted 'young and clean' Omar began a new chapter in Congress-NC alliance politics in Kashmir.

Political circles were of the view that Omar Abdullah was naturally inclined to take the well-trodden paved path. He was a responsible man who went by the book. Short cuts didn't exist for him because he was influenced by dictums of public-school education. Once in a while, he did hop across a grassy slope or jumped a fence in an impulsive moment, but he largely believed in the correct and proper way mapped out after due deliberation. In order words, Omar's thought processes were similar to that of Rahul Gandhi, who had actively campaigned during the polls.

All sorts of rumours floated in the bazars of Srinagar on the uneasy relationship between the father and son. Neither Omar nor Farooq ever let it slip that their styles of working were so different that it was impossible to find common ground between them. Long ago, Farooq had quipped, "I'm not like father. I'm not going to follow my father's politics." Omar repeated the same line about himself in private conversations.

The differences between them were obvious at first glance. Omar was measured, proper, organized and very public school in his approach. Farooq was emotional, disorganized, feudal—a man led by his heart even though the heart often took him down dead ends and U-turns.

One of the first calls Omar made after it was clear that he was to be Chief Minister was to his political opponent Mufti Mohammad Sayeed. "I owed him that courtesy," he explained to a supporter. It was a call his father would never have made."*

Omar's purpose and intent was to emerge from his father's shadow and become a mature national mainstream politician. He couldn't be another quick-silver leader of a regional party playing the local politics of brinkmanship and double deals. Many political observers saw the new, modern voice for Indian Muslims in him. But Omar was clear about the road ahead. Yes, he said, Indian Muslims needed a voice that spoke for them. His destiny, however, lay in Kashmir. "My responsibility, first and foremost, is to be the voice of Jammu and Kashmir. I have to recognize that I have a great responsibility here. People are asking for 20th century stuff—clean water, better electricity supply, pucca roads, teachers who teach. I know that I cannot make everyone happy. But I'm going to do my very best."

Many worried for young Omar. It wasn't important how he dealt with the future, what was vital was how he tackled the past. The burden of history from 1947 apart, the run up to the 2008 elections was marked with political uncertainty, communal polarization and terrorist violence. The Congress-PDP alliance worked somewhat till PDP's Mufti Mohammad Sayeed was the Chief Minister, but it steadily went downhill when Congress' Ghulam Nabi Azad took over during the mid-term of the government. The three-year term for each party was written into the coalition deal, but PDP wasn't too keen to hand over power after completing its three years.

Azad made matters worse for himself as CM by curtailing his public outreach in favour of toning up the administrative machinery. He could make no headway in the latter effort, but managed to antagonize the party's mass base. The big log that finally broke the camel's back was the State government's decision on May 26, 2008, to hand over almost 100 acres of barren land at Baltal, the base camp of Amarnath Yatra, to the Amarnath Shrine Board. The land was to be used to construct temporary structures for pilgrims.

As soon as the decision was announced, it caused a public uproar in the Valley. Protests in Srinagar at one time drew nearly five lakh people to the streets. Separatists' leaders Shabir Shah, Syed Ali Shah Geelani and Mirwaiz Omar Farooq called for a march to the Baltal site. They were put under house arrest. Curfew was clamped in Srinagar and nearby towns.

Protesters defied the orders. Schools, government offices, public buildings and shops were closed. Six people were killed and a 100 were injured when police fired at the crowds in Srinagar.

The protests in the Valley against the transfer elicited a counter response in Hindu-dominated Jammu. An Amarnath Shrine Sangharsh Samiti sprung up and blocked the Jammu-Srinagar highway. Though the road was quickly cleared by the police, Srinagar was rife with anger over the imposition of an economic blockade.

Separatists went into an overdrive to allege it was part of the larger Indian conspiracy to bring Kashmiris to the heel. They insisted that the Baltal land acquisition was actually a covert attempt to settle non-Muslims in Kashmir by building Israel-type settlements in order to alter the demographics of the State.

Writing in The Times of India, Rajeev Deshpande noted, “The well springs of the current agitation seem to lie in PDP poll calculus and a certain unease among the separatists and their jihadi backers on the success of initiatives like the recently opened Centre for South Asian Studies and the reception accorded to Pakistani band Junoon despite a boycott call. With elections round the corner, PDP is looking to strum up sentiments in the Valley while putting Congress in a fix as withdrawing the land order could result in a backlash in Jammu.

It is apparent that Azad, who unlike Mufti, did not object to the transfer of land to the Board, is in a bind. Congress relies on its presence in Jammu while the fight in the Valley is largely between PDP and NC. The PDP leadership, which is chaffed at having to hand over power to Congress in mid-term, is finding it expedient to use the Amarnath Yatra controversy for its ends,” he said.

He continued, “The theory that setting up facilities for pilgrims was actually a covert attempt to settle non-Muslims stretches credulity. The area is hardly hospitable and it would be hard to persuade any population, however deprived, to settle in the area. The pre-fabricated shelters are also not a new proposal. The base camp at Baltal has been in regular use for several years.

“Amarnath Board’s request was before the government for three years since 2005. The proposal was examined by the law department and an empowered committee of the Supreme Court. The State Cabinet had considered the proposal and Forest Minister Qazi Afzal and Deputy CM Muzaffar Baig did not raise any objections. Yet, now the Mufti and Mehbooba have sought to put CM Azad in the dock. Just as ignorance plea was an after-thought, environmental arguments also appear to be belated attempts to build a case against the land transfer.”*

The heat of the disturbances ensured a meltdown. Azad government withdrew its decision to transfer the land on July 1, 2008. PDP walked out of the coalition. Azad resigned his chief ministerial position on July 7. Separatists succeeded in communalizing the State once again and whipping up anti-India sentiment in the Valley. But they were not done yet.

On August 11, about 100,000 protesters were instigated to cross the Indo-Pak border. Ostensibly, the Kashmir Fruit Growers Association wanted the road to Muzaffarabad in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir to be opened so that they could ‘export their products to various Indian states via Muzaffarabad and Wagah border’, and abandon the use of Jammu-Srinagar highway since an ‘economic blockade’ had been imposed on the route. Home Minister Shivraj Patil intervened in the issue, but his assurances were summarily rejected by the separatists under the umbrella of All Party Hurriyat Conference.

Strangely, the State government did not initiate precautionary measures either to foil the march or to contain it. Paramilitary forces were rushed in at the last minute, and in the resultant violence, 15 people were killed and scores of other were injured.

Violence rocked the Valley on August 12, 2008, too. Six persons were killed in Srinagar police firing. Another four were killed in Lasjan on the outskirts of the capital, three died in Paribal, while one person was killed in Anantnag. In Jammu, a Hindu committed suicide to protest revocation of Amarnath land acquisition after donating his property to Shree Amarnath Sangharsh Samiti. The Jammu protests, however, were in sharp contrast to the ones in Srinagar. There was no large-scale violence in Jammu, though over 200,000 people participated in the Jail Bharo Andolan.

The agitation continued for 61 days. The two groups signed an agreement with the Governor -appointed committee under which the shrine board was authorized to erect temporary structures for pilgrims during the duration of the Amarnath Yatra. Elections to the State Assembly were announced for November-December 2008. Separatists again gave a boycott call. Their fear in the Valley ensured that there was no on-ground political activity.

Some political parties were so hard put to find candidates for the polls that they inserted advertisements in local newspapers offering financial support and security to those interested in the contest. Campaigns of major political parties like Congress, NC and PDP shifted from rallies and door-to-door canvassing to messaging on mobile phones. The polling schedule was spread over five weeks—the longest stretch ever in the State's history.

NC President Omar Abdullah launched his party's campaign with a statement that the elections had nothing to do with the larger issue of Kashmir. They were for electing representatives who could solve the day-to-day problems of the people. PDP, on its part, peddled a soft separatist line and wanted the Centre to hold a serious dialogue with all the sections in the Valley. It was still interested in aligning with the Congress, except for Ghulam Nabi Azad.

Terrorist threat was most serious in Omar's constituency in Ganderbal. In beginning of the campaign, the town shut down completely. Local residents tore NC banners and clashed with the police amidst chants of 'no election, no selection, we want freedom'. Omar had to be evacuated from Naid Kadal in Bandipora district when scores of protestors pelted stones at his public meetings. In Anantnag, angry residents pelted stones and rocks at vehicles carrying PDP activists for an election meeting at five different places. At the end of a tough campaign, however, voters came out in large numbers to deliver their mandate.

About 62 per cent of the total votes were cast. NC retained its tally of 28 seats to emerge as the single largest party followed by PDP at 21 seats, an improvement of five seats over its last total. The BJP shot up from one seat to 11, while the Congress went down from 20 to 17. The results gave a clear picture of how the Amarnath Yatra controversy polarized the voters. The

PDP and BJP gained heavily in Muslim and Hindu regions of Kashmir and Jammu, respectively.

Despite the reduction in its seats, Congress held the cards in the formation of a new government. Farooq Abdullah was first off the blocks as the results came in. He said that he was ready to shake hands with the Congress once again and form a coalition government.

The tie-up with Congress was quickly achieved by NC leadership and Omar Abdullah was sworn in by Governor N.N. Vora at the General Zorawar Singh stadium along with nine other ministers. The Cabinet comprised five ministers each from the coalition partners. Congress president Sonia Gandhi specially flew in to attend the ceremony. Industrialists Subhash Chandra and Sunil Mittal were special invitees at the event.

*“Omar Abdullah: a new son over the valley.” mint. January 9, 2009.

Available at:

<https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/A585SBv7veJ6UjOxWvoWSO/Omar-Abdullah-a-new-son-over-the-valley.html>

*“Controversy over Amarnath land allotment poll gimmick?” The Times of India. June 28, 2008. Available at:

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/controversy-over-amarnath-land-allotment-poll-gimmick/articleshow/3173849.cms>

Chapter

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‘The Last Abdullah’, divined the headline of a cover story published by a leading national news magazine on October 18, 2010. The definitive three words were printed in bold black below a portrait of Omar Abdullah dressed in a black shervani, and a black karakul cap. A few shreds of white-grey hair on the temples stood out in the enveloping blackness that surrounded the sombre visage of a man who was not yet 40.

“Omar Abdullah’s drawing room,” the story began, “reflects the sophistication of an upper class Indian, secure in his taste and pedigree. Deep sofas upholstered in gingham cotton, Paresh Maity’s art on the walls, Tibetan thangkas, a crystal vase filled with green apples, Chinese bowls delicately painted over with cherry blossom and dragons. The only references to Kashmir are sepia photographs of the city in the late 19th century; the serenity that was once Kashmir, revealed in the calm waters of a clean, wide Chenab while the pagoda of the Jama Masjid rises into the clear sky like the symbol of a balmy past. Pictures of Omar’s wife Payal and two sons hold place of pride, but those of his father and grandfather are noticeably missing. An Apple Macintosh sits on a desk by the window. This is neither a local ethnic environment nor a political powerbroker’s den. ‘I love skiing in Gulmarg, or I go diving,’ says Omar Abdullah, the lonely Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir. ‘But my only hobby now is to try to stay alive,’ he adds hastily, ‘both politically and otherwise.’”

Omar Abdullah was J&K’s Chief Minister for just 20 months when the cover story appeared; and the prospects for him looked bleak. For nearly 100 days during his 20 months, Kashmir was ravaged by bloody violence.

There were 1,046 incidents in which 90 protesters were killed, and another 525 were injured. As many as 2,682 people were arrested during clashes which also claimed the life of one policeman and injured as many as 3,147. Omar was at a loss to control the violence. The hope he had kindled in the hearts of Kashmiris after his victory in 2009 had been brutally extinguished. The stock of the Abdullahs was at its nadir.

The interviewer asked him directly, “Are you the last Abdullah?”

“I certainly hope so,” Omar replied wistfully. “It may not be, technically, but it will not come from this bloodline. There are other branches of the Abdullahs in Kashmir.”

“You are very candid, aren’t you?” questioned the interviewer.

“Yes, and that always gets me into trouble,” he said with a hint of a mischievous smile.

He admitted that he was upset by the violence in the State. “All I can say is that I will have to live with these three-and-a-half or four months for the rest of my life. Long after the experts have left, and my critics forgotten all this, there won’t be a single time I will be asking myself, what more could I have done? It’s a cross I will have to bear for the rest of my life.”

The disconnect between him and the people hadn’t happened suddenly. Perhaps, it was because of his style of working or his own capacity to deal with complex fluid on-ground situations that caused him to withdraw into a shell in order to grasp the nuances of the problem and solve it.*

The problem was festering since Ghulam Nabi Azad-led government decided to transfer about 100 acres of land to the Amarnath Shrine Board. It sparked of a 6-day stand-off and violence in both Kashmir and Jammu, especially in Kashmir. In the run-up to the elections, it was clear that Kashmir was boiling over. It wasn’t just a law and order problem or one of spontaneous mass anger that could be managed by providing some relief or concessions to the agitators. It was a complex issue that required a calibrated nuanced political response from Omar, that he couldn’t gather his resources to deliver when it counted the most rankled. He had squandered

his goodwill and credibility. The price he was paying now was heavy. Slogans on the street called for azadi from the Abdullahs. The chants made the young man pensive.

“If I am right now everybody’s favourite whipping boy, so be it,” he said with a helpless shrug.

It was indeed a big let-down for a man assured of his sophistication and pedigree, but who was now faced with the joylessness of politics. Opposition leader Mehbooba Mufti summed up Omar thus: “Politics is simply not his lifestyle; he is happy in Delhi eating out and partying. The Chief Minister’s is a 24/7 job. He got a relief package of Rs 2,400 crores from the Centre, what did he do with it?”

The description was largely true as the Chief Minister entrusted the administration to a few of his trusted friends and spent large amounts of time either holidaying or hobnobbing in Delhi. When two civilians died in Army firing at Bomai in February 2009, Omar was away skiing with his family in Gulmarg. The Governor tried to speak to him on the phone—Omar couldn’t be reached. He later told the Governor he would not visit Bomai, but deal with the situation from Gulmarg.

He then ordered the removal of Bomai police camp and initiated action against policemen involved in putting down the Shopian agitation. The action emboldened the separatists and demoralized the police.

Omar’s actions and inactions reminded people of Farooq Abdullah’s ‘heydays’ as Chief Minister in the 1980s and late 1990s. It was an uncharitable comparison since Omar was keen to distance himself from his father and chart a distinctive course for himself. He didn’t want to be caught in his father’s wake. But despite the good intentions, he couldn’t help being inept and aloof. History was repeating itself as a farce.

In 2009, when Omar assumed office, the bitter experience of Amarnath agitation was still fresh, though violence had subsided to a great extent. Optimism was in the air because people looked towards a peaceful resolution of the dispute. Inexplicably, the government sat on its haunches for the next few months and the exasperated mood of the people gave way

to a series of stone-pelting incidents. Hope died, and Kashmir slid into greater chaos.

Stone-pelting was not new to Kashmir. Militant protests in 1989 were heralded by stone-pelting. It was replaced by young men with AK-47s and hand grenades. A period of relative lull followed the turn of the century before it was back with a vengeance. Violence became vicious, well-directed and widespread in 2009-2010. The government's effort to crush it through strong-arm methods—curfew, arbitrary detentions and restrictions—failed to rein in the stone-pelters.

As a matter of statistics, if not an unfortunate commentary on Kashmir civil life, the Valley remained shut for more than 1,500 days due to curfew and bandhs during the 1980 and 1990 decades. Relative peace returned in 2007, it was closed for just 13 days, and in the next two years, for about 35 days. But 2010 was the worst. It was shut for 30 days in the first six months itself.

The stone-pelting protesters were directed by a firm 'hidden hand'. Police and various intelligence agencies unearthed WhatsApp groups and mobile messages which emanated from definite identifiable sources that gave instructions on the schedule for the day. The Mail, UK, carried a long investigative story on how protestors were paid Rs 6,000 to 7,000 per month to hurl stones at security persons. The rates for making and throwing Molotov cocktails at officers, legislators and politicians were higher.*

The Tribune newspaper, in one of its reports said, "Separatists and workers of a political party are allegedly behind the spate of stone-pelting incidents as the police seized an auto rickshaw laden with stones meant for distribution. The police also recovered Rs 7.5 lakh from alleged over-ground workers of militant outfits meant for payment to the stone-throwing protesters . . . the arrested auto rickshaw driver was instructed by the brother of a separatist leader to transport stones to various areas in south Kashmir with the aim of targeting the police. A senior police official said the separatists, who were being helped by workers of a political party, begin stone-pelting, leaving innocent civilians to face the police."†

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) reported that the separatists were bankrolled by slush funds generated through the border barter trade. The

NIA wrote to the government that such funds amounted to Rs 850 crore between 2010 and 2015. Border trade between India and Pakistan, opened in October 2008 after a gap of 61 years, plied through two designated routes—Uri-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawalakot. A select list of 21 items—mainly local produce such as carpets, handloom, fruits—were traded through these points. Terrorists converted the trade routes into routes for transfer of cash from Pakistan to India.*

The politician-protestor-ISI nexus forced the police, in the absence of a political response, to crack down hard. Several school-going teenagers lost their lives in police firing, fuelling yet another round of violence on the streets. Just one example of the vicious cycle would suffice. School-going Tufail was killed when he was hit by a teargas shell. Protest ensued and 25-year-old Rafiq Bangroo, a carpet-weaver, was beaten up by the CRPF; he died in the hospital.

The local administration delivered his body to the family in the middle of the night and arranged his burial early next morning. But, the ‘boys’ returning from the funeral set fire to a CRPF armoured vehicle. In the melee, Bangroo’s cousin Javid Malla (19) was shot. Violent protests soon spread across downtown Srinagar. A curfew was imposed. Omar Abdullah angrily blamed separatists for the incident. He described Javed’s death as ‘suicidal’. The description infuriated people once again.

If there was violence on the streets, there was violence at the Chief Minister’s residence on Gupkar Road, too. Mohammad Yousuf, a party worker from Anantnag, died on September 30, 2011. He was summoned to Abdullah’s residence the previous day to explain complaints that Yousuf took money from two other NC workers to secure a ministership for one of them and a seat in the Legislative Council for the other.

One of the bribe-givers, Abdul Salam Reshi, said that Yousuf took him to Omar for appointment as an MLC in exchange for money. He alleged that a ministership in the State carried a price tag of Rs 1 crore and an MLC seat was priced at Rs 50 lakhs. “I was told to give money to the party fund if I want to become an MLC. I didn’t know that they charge money for seats,” Reshi said.

Omar was enraged by the accusation. He closely questioned both the men. What transpired thereafter is not known, but Reshi, who claimed he witnessed the on-goings inside the CM's house through a window, said that when Yousuf emerged from the CM's house, 'he looked like a dead body' and was vomiting. He was rushed to hospital. The police said he died due to a cardiac arrest.

Yousuf's son, Talib Hussain, directly implicated Omar in his father's death. He said there were 'torture' marks on his father's face. "I believe he was physically tortured there," he said.

The incident created a political storm in J&K. Opposition parties created a ruckus in the Assembly on October 3, 2011. Naeem Akhtar, PDP spokesman, said, "The case is now becoming so clear—the evidence is coming from all sides, including from Omar Abdullah (which he gave in an interview), that now it remains only for the dead to come back from the grave and tell what happened with him." The Opposition demanded Omar's resignation over the custodial death.

The Chief Minister reacted with a sense of hurt. "I see no reason why I should resign either as Home Minister or as Chief Minister for having done the right thing—for having taken cognizance of serious allegation of bribe-taking. I have done nothing wrong in handing over, both, the bribe-giver and the bribe-taker, to the police for further investigations. Nobody laid a finger on the deceased as long as he was in my residence and I would like to believe no one laid a finger on him after he left my residence."

Omar asserted Yousuf admitted taking the bribe. He then called the Inspector General of Police (Crime) to his house to arrest Yousuf. "The preliminary post-mortem report states categorically that there were no injury marks on the body of the deceased," police said after the death.

Omar ordered a judicial inquiry into the death, and alongside suspended his Personal Security Officer Shabir Ahmed over the incident. Shabir was Omar's Man Friday. He was promoted from an Inspector to Deputy Superintendent of Police superseding 200 other Inspectors as soon as Omar assumed office as CM.*

The death of the party worker came soon after Omar Abdullah committed a faux pas in the Assembly by tabling papers that revealed the names of hundreds of rape victims in the State. It was a violation of Supreme Court guidelines prohibiting public naming of rape victims. The incident embarrassed the government deeply. Omar offered his unconditional apologies to the House and to the people.†

On the political front, the government's performance put a heavy strain on Congress-NC ties. State Congress chief Saif-ud-din Soz admitted to a local daily, "Rahul Gandhi is not happy with governance in the State."

Omar took the remark to heart. "I don't know whether Soz sahab is authorized to speak on behalf of Rahul Gandhi, most certainly he's not," he retorted irritably. "If Rahul has certain feelings regarding governance, he will make them known to me. All I can say is that in all the years that I have known Rahul, he has not said anything regarding the way in which the governance has been functioning here. If he (Rahul) has spoken to Soz sahab and Soz sahab is authorized to speak on Rahul's behalf then I really have nothing more to say about that."

Differences between the coalition partners also sprung up over Omar's plans to partially revoke the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in the State. Congress complained it was not consulted on the sensitive issue. Omar asserted his government had the authority to revoke the 'controversial' law. He didn't need to consult the Congress.*

Former Chief Minister and Congress' bigwig in Kashmir, Ghulam Nabi Azad too was unhappy with him. He said that Omar had stalled the development work started by him as CM.

The coalition was ridiculed in the Assembly too. PDP's Naeem Akhter said though coalitions are 'marriages of convenience', the NC-Congress did not fall into the category because of its performance. "It seems more of a live-in relationship," he remarked with a mischievous smile. Omar retorted that it was neither a marriage nor a live-in relationship. It was a 'friendship' and an 'old relation'.†

As the political weather turned foul for Omar, a section of the National Conference leadership initiated a campaign to make the Chief Minister quit either in favour of his father or one of the aggressive second rung leaders. Young leaders like Abdul Rahim Rather, Chaudhry Mohammad Ramzan, and Sakina Itoo were referred to in his context. Congress indicated its support to Abdul Rather, the Finance Minister in Omar's Cabinet. State Congress leaders believed that replacing Omar would signal to the population that India was tied with their interests and not with the interests of the Abdullahs. Omar dismissed the talk as mere gossip.

On the ground, NC cadre were facing public heat. They were firm in their view, "If Omar stays, it will be the end of the NC. And the end of the Abdullahs, too."

The government, meanwhile, changed track and adopted a policy of challenging Hurriyat Conference leader Geelani's tactics of stone-throwing and bandhs. Stone-pelters were met with police firing, including firing of pellet bullet that blinded scores of people. Geelani's strike calendar was countered with prolonged curfew whenever a hartal was called. Along with Operation Curfew, Omar's government played the education card against Geelani. The government declared its intention to open schools, closed for several months, under police protection. Geelani retaliated with stone-pelting on school buses.

'Healing touch' was also on Omar's agenda. He showcased it by ordering a crackdown on the police. Policemen, including superintendents of police, were arrested and jailed, some on charges of murder. It wrecked the State apparatus beyond repair.*

Omar's problems were compounded by his father's actions and utterances. At a conference on renewable energy, which he addressed as a Union Minister, Farooq labelled Kashmiris as not only 'chor but maha chors (not just thieves but big thieves)'. It led to bedlam in J&K Assembly the following day.

Another major embarrassment occurred in Delhi in December 2012 at a function hosted by Farooq in Kashmir House. Abdullah Senior was about to start his dance when Omar rushed in and dragged him down from the stage.

The audience was stunned. “Stop it,” Omar hissed at his father, “they are not appreciating you . . . they are ridiculing you.” Farooq resisted his son’s interference, but Omar whisked him away from the venue.

In addition, one more unsavoury incident took place during the campaign for 2014 general elections. At a poll rally in April, Farooq thundered, “They say those who do not vote for Modi should go to Pakistan. I say those who vote for Modi should drown in the sea . . . I pray to God to save us from communal forces so that we can move forward. India cannot become communal. If it becomes communal, then Kashmir will not remain with India.” Farooq’s rhetoric gave prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi the perfect opportunity to hit back hard.

Modi responded promptly on Twitter: “Instead of telling those voting for Modi to drown, Dr Abdullah should look at himself and his family in the mirror and see how they ruined J&K . . . Just for sake of politics, Dr Abdullah’s family communalized J&K which is a land of Sufism and harmony,” he began and retched up the pitch. “Dr Abdullah, in the history of our glorious culture, if there is someone who has done most harm to secularism it is you and your family. Our path is the path of good governance and development. Irresponsible statements by the likes of Dr Abdullah cannot derail India’s mission,” Modi shot back.

The rise of Narendra Modi phenomenon in the country, along with the anti-corruption movement of Anna Hazare, diverted the Congress attention from J&K. Omar survived the political onslaughts on his authority, but as parliamentary elections neared, it became certain that the NC had few takers. Farooq Abdullah was trounced from Srinagar parliamentary seat by his PDP rival. It was the first ever electoral defeat for him, more bitter because in 1980, he had won the seat unopposed. Congress’ Ghulam Nabi Azad bit the dust from Jammu.

The results indicated a clear communal demarcation—BJP won all the three seats (2 from Jammu and 1 from Ladakh) in 2014, where the Hindus were in majority. The PDP swept Kashmir Valley. It routed NC comprehensively. Omar was visibly upset when the final results came in. “I would not blame our allies in Congress for not voting for us when our own senior leaders

faced a rout in their areas,” he said in an oblique reference to his father’s performance at the hustings.

State Assembly elections were held in November–December 2014, about six months after the Lok Sabha polls. Farooq Abdullah was in London for kidney replacement surgery. Omar was on his own, and he failed to deliver yet again. The Assembly election repeated parliamentary poll results. BJP held sway in Jammu. PDP romped home in Kashmir. The BJP added 14 seats to its previous tally of 11, while the PDP notched up 7 more seats to secure a total of 28 seats. NC ended up with 15 wins, 13 down from the last engagement. Congress fell from 17 to 12. Omar resigned as Chief Minister.

Three days after the results, the NC approached the BJP for a meeting to try and form a government. It offered to support BJP’s Nirmal Singh as Chief Minister. The proposal provoked a revolt in the party. Senior leaders were aghast that a deal with ‘communal’ BJP had even been thought of. The BJP also rejected the idea on ‘moral grounds’.

In the days following the rebuff, the NC announced its intention to support the PDP from the outside. It even submitted a letter of support to the Governor. It didn’t realize that Narendra Modi had already positioned his party for a possible alliance with PDP. Mehbooba Mufti had met Modi in October after the devastating floods in the Valley had occurred. Their conversation lasted for about 45 minutes.

A week after the results, the PDP and the BJP officially started talks, and after two months and five days, they finalized a Common Minimum Programme on February 18, 2015. Mufti Mohammad Sayeed was sworn in as Chief Minister on March 1. BJP’s Nirmal Singh was appointed his deputy. Omar Abdullah witnessed the take-over by parties espousing the majoritarian cause, one in Jammu, and the other in Srinagar, with a sense of déjà vu.

*Shankar, Ravi. “Am I the Last Abdullah? I Hope So.” India Today, 2010. Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover->

story/story/20101018-am-i-the-last-abdullah-i-hope-so-744407-2010-10-07

*Khan, Jamshed and Sushant Pathak. “‘This is our bread and butter’: Undercover reporters film Kashmiri ‘stone-pelters’ admit to being paid Rs 7,000 a month for throwing stones and Molotovs at Indian forces.” Mail Online India. March 29, 2017. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/indianews/article-4362020/Kashmiri-stone-pelters-admit-paid-film.html>

†“Separatists behind stone-pelting incidents: Police.” The Tribune. March 10, 2009. Available at: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20090311/j&k.htm>

*“How Pakistan funds separatists, stone-pelters in Kashmir through illegal barter trade at LoC.” India Today. June 17, 2017. Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/india-pakistan-trade-pok-kashmir-stone-pelters-separatists-983034-2017-06-16>

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†“Omar Abdullah apologizes for disclosing names of rape victim.” The Times of India. September 30, 2011. Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Omar-Abdullah-apologizes-for-disclosing-names-of-rape-victims/articleshow/10181279.cms>

*“Fresh strain in NC-Cong ties.” The Indian Express. November 10, 2011. Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/regional/fresh-strain-in-nccong-ties/>

†“Omar lauds NC-Cong ‘friendship.’” The Pioneer. February 18, 2014. Available at: <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2014/india/omar-lauds-nc-cong-friendship.html>

*Shankar, Ravi. “THE LAST Abdullah.” India Today, 2010. Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20101018-the-last-abdullah-744389-2010-10-17>

Chapter

28

Mufti Mohammad Sayeed died on January 6, 2016, and his daughter Mehbooba took over as Chief Minister. The alliance with the BJP continued tenuously till it broke in June 2018 and Governor's rule was enforced in the State. Politician Satya Pal Malik replaced bureaucrat N.N. Vohra as Governor. Malik initially tried to clobber together the factions of various political parties to get a government going, but he soon abandoned his efforts.

A few weeks before the 2019 general elections, in the run up to the second term as Prime Minister, Narendra Modi hinted at the possible contours of what the top leadership had in mind when he said, "The problem in Kashmir is largely due to 50-odd political families there. They have been milking the issue. They don't want any benefit to be given to ordinary Kashmiris. People want freedom from such political families who have been preying on their emotions for 50 years. The situation in Kashmir is such that people want change, whether it is about Article 35A or Article 370."*

The statement rankled in Farooq Abdullah's mind, more so when the hushed whispers turned into urgent conversations in the streets. Article 35A was about to go, they said. But will Article 370 be abrogated too? Did New Delhi have the political will to take away the special status of Kashmir and bring it at par with other States in India?

The political elite in the Valley reasoned no government could dare to abrogate the 'permanent' provision in the Constitution. Legal eagles pointed

out that the Supreme Court had, as late as in April 2018, ruled that Article 370 was a ‘permanent feature’ of the Indian Constitution and could not be tampered with.

Farooq Abdullah met the Governor, Satya Pal Malik, and queried him about the likelihood of abrogation of Article 370. “I have taken oath as Governor under the J&K constitution. How can I tamper with it?” he replied with a smile. Farooq Abdullah wasn’t convinced; he had enough reasons to be wary of such responses. But he held on to the hope that the BJP government would not interfere with the Constitutional guarantees accorded to J&K.

Deep worry lines, however, formed on his broad forehead in July 2019. There was a lot amiss in the way the politics was being played out by the BJP. The foreboding was coming to a pass. The skies, in fact, had suddenly darkened over the 16th hole of Farooq’s political life. He had anticipated a quiet, deft putt at the end of his game, but the course was rapidly turning hostile.

Parliament was in session in July 2019. The crucial Triple Talaq Bill was taken up. Muslim clerics were up in arms against it, but the Modi government’s 303-member majority in the new Lok Sabha ensured its smooth passage.

Soon after the Bill was passed on July 25, 2019, the Parliamentary Affairs Minister rose to announce that Parliament’s session was extended till August 7. The sudden move sparked off an intense round of speculation on the fate of Article 370.

The announcement startled Farooq Abdullah. He, along with his son Omar, travelled to Delhi on August 1, 2019, to speak their mind to the Prime Minister. They met him for 20 minutes. Farooq spoke about the ‘apprehensions’ and ‘tensions in people’s mind’ and asked the PM not to take ‘any step’ that may lead to deterioration of the situation in Kashmir.

In a series of tweets after the meeting, Omar Abdullah wrote, “We requested him that no precipitous steps of any sort should be taken . . . When we say there should be no step, it covers all issues including Article 370 and Article

35 A . . . We are of the view that let a new government be elected and take decisions on it.”*

Farooq and Omar also suggested holding the Assembly elections by the end of 2019. The Prime Minister heard them patiently. He gave no specific assurance on issues red-flagged by the Abdullahs.

The Union Government moved swiftly and secretly. The extension of Parliament’s session was followed up by the decision to abruptly terminate the annual pilgrimage of Hindus from all over the country to the holy Amarnath cave in Kashmir. The pilgrimage had never been called off even during the worst phase of terrorism in the State. There was a serious security threat to the pilgrims, the government said, and ordered pilgrims and tourists to leave Kashmir immediately.

Special flights and road transport were organized post-haste to ferry non-residents out of Kashmir. In three days, over half a million tourists and migrant labourers were shifted out in a war-like operation. Simultaneously, 45,000 additional personnel of central security forces, besides the 300,000 already posted in Kashmir, were flown in to tackle any potential threat to law and order.

The days and nights preceding August 5, 2019 were tense for the Abdullahs. They were certain something big was happening, but did not know what they could expect, and how soon. The intimate and extended Abdullah family are each other’s neighbours at Gupkar Road—Farooq and son Omar, Farooq and his brother Dr Kamal Mustafa, his sister Khalida, nephew Muzaffar Shah, besides others. They met over lunch almost every day. Invariably, the talk drifted to political apprehensions.

Farooq Abdullah was convinced that the anticipated government move should be countered by a political offensive. As a first step, he rallied all political formations, excluding the BJP and the Hurriyat Conference, on a common platform for a show of strength and solidarity. A pre-emptive political strike was necessary to warn New Delhi against tinkering with the State’s special status.

Prominent Kashmir leaders met at Farooq Abdullah's house on August 4, 2019 at 4 p.m. Six mainstream parties—Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, J&K People's Democratic Party, CPI (M), J&K Awami National Conference, J&K People's Movement and J&K People's Conference—were represented.

Mehbooba Mufti, Muzaffar Hussain Baig, Abdul Rehman Veeri, Sajad Ghani Lone, Imran Reza Ansari, Abdul Ghani Vakil, Taj Mohiuddin, Mohammad Yousuf Tarigami, Omar Abdullah, Mohammad Akbar Lone, Nasir Aslam Wani, Shah Faesal, Ali Mohammad Sagar, Muzaffar Shah, Uzair Ronga, and Suhail Bukhari deliberated under the light of a dying sun for over an hour.

The mood was sombre; there was palpable nervousness about Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah's next political move, more so because of the frenzy of on ground activity during the preceding days. Modi and Shah's reputation of executing bold 'masterstrokes' in their relentless pursuit of the BJP's Hindu majoritarian agenda at the social and political levels fuelled the disquiet among the participants.

Farooq had considered the options before him on days preceding the meeting. Through his 45-year long career as Kashmir's political prima donna, he had dared most times, and won. At other times, he had played footsie, and won. On some occasions, he had deliberately absented himself from the scene—much to the chagrin of his supporters and the media—but bounced back because he was an essential requisite in the J&K political mix.

Political pandits, in fact, had not been able to put a finger on what made Farooq Abdullah tick so successfully. Perhaps, it was personal charisma. Perhaps, fortuitous turn of events, or his natural talent for shrewd deal-making. It could also be his uncanny political instincts, or the outcome of cocktail circuit friendships. Whatever it was, the hallmark of his career was his ability to shoot a hole-in-one from the rough. He was never browbeaten by a previous adverse handicap card.

Farooq crossed the lawns of his bungalow in quick strides and met the Kashmir leaders. “Whatever they are up to, we do not know at this moment,” he said gravely, “what we do know is there may be plans afoot to tinker with the special status of the State. We can’t let it happen.”

He paused, and burst out with irritation, “We will not stand and watch as they run all over what was given to us nearly 70 years ago as our legitimate right. We have to fight against all such attempts by New Delhi. Our voice cannot be silenced.”

The meeting unanimously adopted a resolution known as the Gupkar Declaration of August 4, 2019. It read ‘All the parties would be united in their resolve to protect and defend the identity, autonomy and special status of J&K against all attacks and onslaughts whatsoever; that modification, abrogation of Articles 35A, 370, unconstitutional delimitation or trifurcation of the State would be an aggression against the people of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh.’* The use of phrases ‘attacks and onslaughts’, and ‘an aggression against the people’ of the State underlined the belligerent and desperate mood of the meeting.

“We must,” Farooq said, passionately, “stand up against the moves of New Delhi to obliterate the existence of the historical State of Jammu and Kashmir. We must prepare ourselves for a long fight. They don’t realize they are playing with fire.”

A few hours after the leaders dispersed, at 11 p.m. on August 4, phones went dead. The main gate of Farooq Abdullah’s house was taken over by security forces. “You can’t go out,” he was told brusquely. “You are under house arrest.” Members of the family, including son Omar, were also detained at their residences along with other political leaders. All forms of telecommunications—landlines, cell phones and internet—were cut throughout the Valley. Curfew was also imposed in sensitive areas of the State.

Alongside, Indian Army pounded Pakistan positions along the Line of Control with 155 mm Bofors howitzers. It was for the first time since the 1999 Kargil War that heavy artillery was deployed on the Kashmir border with Pakistan.

On August 5, Union Home Minister Amit Shah was on his feet in Rajya Sabha to table the Jammu and Kashmir Reservation (Second Amendment) Bill, 2019, and the J&K Reorganisation Bill, 2019. The latter was for bifurcating the State into two Union Territories—Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir and Union Territory of Leh. The passage of the Bill by Parliament would give India 28 states and nine union territories. It was for the first time in India's history that a full-fledged state was being devolved into two union territories.

The objective of rendering Article 370 fully futile was achieved through deft legal manoeuvring. Home Minister Amit Shah did not move a Bill to amend the Constitution. He instead used a Presidential Order—the Constitution (Application to Jammu and Kashmir) Order, 2019, which superseded the Constitution (Application to Jammu and Kashmir) Order, 1954.

The Presidential Order, which came into effect immediately, removed the special status accorded to the State of J&K under Article 370 in Part XXI (Temporary, Transitional and Special Provisions) of the Constitution of India. By extension, Article 35A was also repealed, as it arose from Article 370. It had been brought in through a Presidential Order in 1954.

The third clause of Article 370 gave the President of India the power to declare the Article inoperative or operative with exceptions and modifications, subject to obtaining prior recommendation of the Constituent Assembly of the State of J&K. The Constituent Assembly of J&K, after drafting the State's constitution, had dissolved itself in 1956. Most legal experts were of the view that Article 370 could not be repealed or modified as the Constituent Assembly did not exist anymore. The Supreme Court, in April 2018, said though the head-note used the word 'temporary', Article 370 was not temporary.

The Presidential Order of 2019, therefore, first added a new clause to Article 367, which dealt with interpretation in respect of J&K. It replaced Constituent Assembly of the State with Legislative Assembly of the State. As the Assembly was in suspension, the order said that any reference to the Legislative Assembly would be construed to be a reference to the Governor; and since the Governor was an appointee of the Centre, Parliament was now

the Legislative Assembly. No concurrence of the State government was, therefore, required.

Amit Shah, Modi's co-architect in the new design, also moved a statutory resolution in the Rajya Sabha recommending that the President issued a notification—using Clause 3 of Article 370—to declare that all clauses of Article 370 would cease to be operative and that all provisions of the Indian Constitution would apply to the State of J&K. In other words, though Article 370 was not repealed—it was rendered null and void for all practical purposes.

“Article 370 was the root of terror in Jammu and Kashmir. It is time for it to go . . . if it doesn't go today, we can't remove terrorism from Jammu and Kashmir,” Amit Shah told Rajya Sabha. “Nothing will happen . . . It (Kashmir) won't be allowed to turn into another Kosovo. It was heaven on earth and will remain so . . . It needed strong political will to end Article 370, to rise above vote-bank politics. Narendra Modi had the will to do it,” he declared amidst cheers from the Treasury benches.

Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha, Ghulam Nabi Azad of the Congress, on the other hand, lamented that Jammu and Kashmir was being ‘broken into pieces’. “We went from Prime Minister to Chief Minister, now we're at Lieutenant Governor. You've made the Governor a clerk. You've made Jammu and Kashmir a non-entity.”

He turned to Amit Shah and said, “Bring this to your State and see what happens.” Shah gave him a beatific smile.

Though the BJP did not have a clear majority in Rajya Sabha, the Bill received support from both sides of the House. As many as 125 members (67 %) voted in favour of scrapping Article 370 and 35 A, while 61 members (33%) were against it.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi walked up to Home Minister Amit Shah as soon as the Rajya Sabha passed the Bill. Shah bowed double, caught Modi's hand and touched it to his forehead in reverence. Modi patted his back twice to acknowledge a job well done. It was a historic day for them in

more ways than one—and for the population of now defunct state of Jammu and Kashmir.

A day later, the Lok Sabha passed the Bill. An overwhelming 86% of the members supported it. It was quite a parliamentary coup for Modi and Shah.

Writing in Indian Express later, BJP leader Ram Madhav, who had played a crucial role in the BJP-PDP alliance, said, “There was an insistence on recognizing that J&K’s merger with India in 1947, although it had other options as a Muslim-majority State, was a concession by its people and, hence, India should perpetually be grateful to them. This had bred a sense of Kashmiri exceptionalism in the mainstream political establishment of the State for decades. Article 370 was seen as India’s grateful gesture, not for material development, but as a stamp of acknowledgement of that exceptionalism. Successive governments in Delhi chose to ignore this subterranean sentiment and continued to pamper the leadership . . . They were exploited by forces within and without to promote an entire infrastructure of separatism and terrorism in the Valley. The nullification of Article 370 was intended to end this exceptionalism.”*

For the Abdullahs, it meant reinventing their relevance one more time. Sheikh Abdullah had done it when he had signed the Indira-Sheikh Accord. Farooq had manoeuvred the Rajiv-Farooq Accord of 1986 to upturn his unseating by brother-in-law G.M. Shah. And later, at the turn of the century, Farooq and Omar had worked with the BJP government of Atal Behari Vajpayee—the father as Chief Minister and the son as Union minister.

The Abdullahs, in fact, had salvaged their prominence at every political turn, though they had to wait on the sidelines several times. Those who had written them off during their downturn were embarrassed by their comeback. The Abdullahs and the State of Jammu & Kashmir, it was said, were inexorably linked. The State had now ceased to exist. Farooq and Omar were in detention under the stringent Public Safety Act, too.

*“Political families ‘milking’ Kashmir issue: Modi.” The Quint. April 9, 2019. Available at: <https://www.thequint.com/news/hot-news/political-families-milking-kashmir-issue-modi>

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Chapter

29

Farooq Abdullah climbed to the roof of the garage at his Gupkar Road residence shortly after Friday prayers, raised both his hands and declared in a high-pitched voice, “I am free. I am free.” Dressed in all-black with a karakul cap on his head, the 83-year-old patriarch of the Abdullah family was as excited as he had always been at all his public outings. Ill-health over the last several years, including heart, liver, kidney, knee and eye issues, coupled with a 221-day detention under the stringent Public Safety Act, had not dimmed his gung-ho spirit.

The order of his release came suddenly on March 13, 2020. A couple of days earlier, the government had extended his detention by another three months, but concerns about his health and mounting political pressure, both domestic and international, forced the government’s hand to order his release.

“We tried for so many months to see this gate open,” he said emotionally, “Today I don’t have words, the way I feel today, I’m free,” but, he added, “I will not speak on political matters until everyone else is released. I hope my people will be free. The people of this State will be free. Let us pray to God that we get true freedom for which we have been trying for so long. I hope the Government of India will take action soon to release everyone if they want the people of this State to live as free people.”

Less than 200 meters down Gupkar Road, his son Omar Abdullah was still in detention. Farooq drove down to meet him. The two hugged for a long time.*

Orders for Omar's release came ten days later. Omar was also detained on August 5, 2019, under Section 107 of CrPC (security for keeping the peace). Once he served the maximum period of detention under this clause, he was slapped with charges under PSA on February 5, 2020. He could be now held for two years without trial.

In its PSA dossier, the administration described him as a threat to public safety. It said that he was 'planning activities against the Union government'. It also highlighted his 'popularity and potential to draw voters to polling booths'.

The grounds were challenged by his sister Sara Pilot in a habeas corpus petition. Sara is married to Congress politician Sachin Pilot. Her petition said that the authorities made no effort to verify the truth behind the 'information' that Abdullah was a threat to peace. On the other hand, there were reams of material in the form of tweets and public statements vouching for his exemplary conduct to maintain peace. A two-judge bench asked the government to explain Omar's detention. It said that it would take up the petition on merit on the next date of hearing if the state did not release him. The observations compelled the government to revoke PSA against him.

Omar, on his part, utilized the 232 days of detention to grow a long, flowing salt and pepper beard. He also did some serious soul-searching.

Omar drove from Hari Niwas sub-jail to the family home on March 24, 2020. "232 days after my detention today I finally left Hari Niwas. It's a very different world today to the one that existed on 5th August 2019," he tweeted shortly after his release. "Had lunch with mom and dad for the first time in almost 8 months. I can't remember a better meal even though I've been in a bit of a daze & don't remember what I ate."

Omar's tweets revealed his mind to a large extent. Unlike his father, he was in a reflective mood. "J&K as a State was broken down into two Union Territories. For months, people have faced hardships, children couldn't go to school, shopkeepers couldn't earn. Several sectors faced hardships. People were confined to their houses. I thought I would speak a lot about the situation, but today I realized we are fighting life and death. I would

speak openly about what has been done to us, our State later,” he remarked. It was clear he was steering away from politics and his immediate priority was the COVID-19 pandemic.

The question of finding political space for himself and National Conference dominated his mind space, too. Jammu and Kashmir was no longer a state. It was now a union territory which was to be administered directly by the Central government. A delimitation exercise for rejigging Assembly constituencies had also been initiated by the government. It meant that many of the traditional NC strongholds in Kashmir as well as in Jammu would have to cede the demographic advantage. The Valley’s dominance in the Assembly would, therefore, end.

There was also little scope of full-time politics in the Union Territory till the time a State Assembly came into existence. Issues such as azadi, autonomy, self-rule, Article 370, step-motherly treatment by the Centre, etc.—the main planks of the Kashmir Valley political discourse—had become irrelevant overnight. NC cadre was in disarray. Farooq Abdullah wasn’t feeling too well either. The short term, at the very least, appeared bleak for Omar and his party.

“The person who went into detention centre on August 5, 2019, is not the person who came out,” Omar mused in an interview, “I always believed in what I was doing. I believed what I was doing was right. Now I don’t know where I am at the moment.”

Omar said he could feel the ‘pent up anger, disappointment’ among the people after the political changes that happened on August 5. He said that pro-Pak sentiment had grown in Kashmir due to the dissatisfaction and the people ‘are not looking for justice from this government . . . we don’t expect anything from it.’

Omar was pensive.

“I have long given up this urge to prove my patriotism. It is very difficult to reconcile with the anti-national tag, given the sacrifices made by NC workers . . . I am (now) a villain for them (Centre),” Omar said.

“I have learned to be true to myself . . . I feel deeply jaded . . . I am a disappointed individual,” he admitted, “something inside me has snapped. It is far more difficult now to motivate myself for political activity. I feel deeply demotivated . . . A certain light inside may not have been switched off but it’s a lot dimmer . . . I have never been like this . . . I am grappling with doubts . . . I am struggling with the question whether I should continue in politics . . . I refuse to be gung-ho and lie.”*

It was a moment of reckoning for the Abdullahs. They knew that it would take a long time for the uncertain future to be certain again. They could now only wait and watch.

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Authors' Bio

Ashwini Bhatnagar is an experienced journalist who has held editorial leadership positions in top newspapers like The Times of India, The Tribune, Sunday Mail, The Pioneer, and has actively reported in Jammu & Kashmir since 1988. He has also written 18 books so far, mostly in the biography genre. The Lotus Years: Political Life in India in the Time of Rajiv Gandhi was nominated for the Best Non-Fiction Book of the Year Award at TataLit Live 2020. Six of his books have also been acquired for on-screen adaption.

R.C. Ganjoo is a veteran surveyor of terrorism and politics in J&K and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir since 1980, first as a correspondent for All India Radio and Doordarshan, and then as a Kashmir correspondent for The Week magazine, Sunday Mail, ANI, etc. Audio-visual rights of two of his books have been acquired by film producers. He is also a documentary filmmaker.

Why was it that terrorism peaked every time
'nationalist' Dr Farooq Abdullah took charge
as Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir?

Was Dr Abdullah's gamesmanship responsible for
triggering three decades of violence in the Kashmir Valley?

Has the abrogation of Article 370 forever changed
the political equations in J&K?

Known as a flamboyant politician in India, Dr Abdullah has
a penchant for the high life with an equally robust appetite
for backroom game of thrones. *Farooq of Kashmir* provides
fascinating insight into his shrewd and often dramatic
posturing, bringing forth the story of a political leader who
has made himself indispensable to the Kashmir political mix.

